

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

A PSYCHOGRAPH

Lois Jeynes Denny

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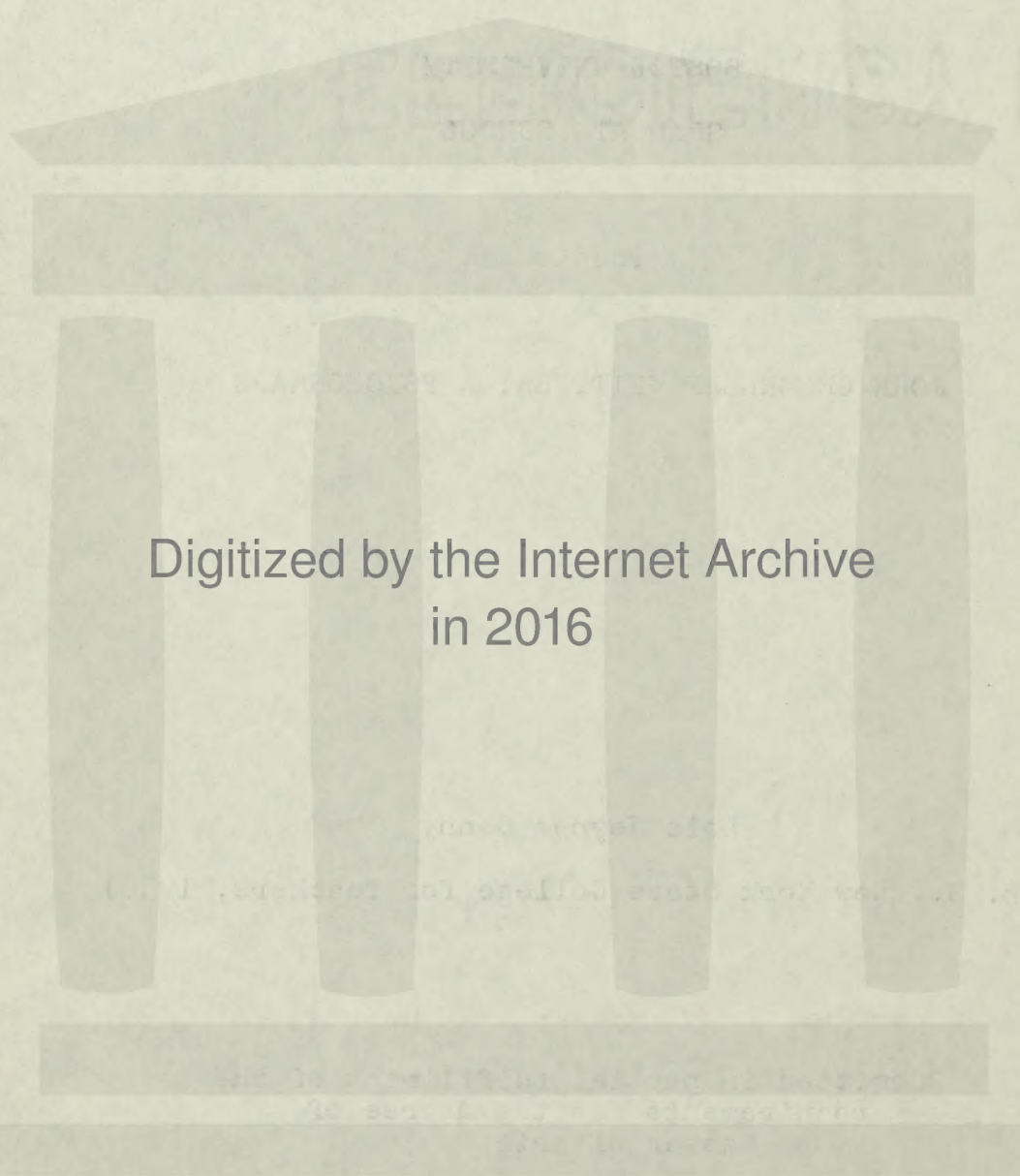
JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER: A PSYCHOGRAPH

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Out of this welter of information, the following study is an attempt to see the man Whittier and to discover if there is any unifying principle in his life which helps explain the divergent evaluations of him today, as well as his popular appeal in his own time.





### Statement Of Purpose

There is no more interesting nor rewarding study than the study of a person, particularly if such person is one who has influenced his age to any appreciable extent. A psychograph of Whittier is particularly challenging because there have been few men so popular during life and so fallen from popularity in the following generation.

This study began with the determination to find the real Whittier and to discover why he appealed so strongly to his own generation--no generation of morons; but individuals very much like the average American today.

Everything from rabble-rousing and misogyny to quietism and saintliness has been accredited to Whittier by his biographers. An extensive search has been made for all evidence in the poet's formal writings, both prose and poetry; in his letters, both business and friendly. To this, his own witness, has been added the biographical accounts of those equipped to write of him, as well as personal letters to him reflecting his life and interests.

Out of this welter of information, the following study is an attempt to see the man Whittier and to discover if there is any unifying principle in his life which helps explain the divergent evaluations of him today, as well as his popular appeal in his own time.





Although Whittier cannot be called popular today, there has been no period between the earliest days of his editorial work and today in which he or his works have not been a subject of discussion. The bibliography appended to this report gives some indication of the wealth of material available. The best index to material available before 1937 is The Bibliography of John Greenleaf Whittier edited by Thomas Franklin Currier, a volume of over nine hundred pages. Another excellent help, listing articles in periodicals from 1920 to 1945 is Lewis Leary's Articles on American Literature--a time-saver in checking after the four standard periodical indexes (Poole's, the Nineteenth Century, the International, and Readers' Guide) had been consulted. The Boston University Library, the Boston Public Library, the Green Mountain Junior College Library, the Widener Library of Harvard, and the Sterling Library of Yale have all yielded material for this study.

From the writer's standpoint the study has been enjoyable. Because of its factual basis, though the conclusions may not be startling, it is hoped that they will be convincing.

Through his study of history a broader understanding of man in his strength and his failings; he is more likely to be concerned with attacking certain specific wrongs; he is less

1. John Greenleaf Whittier. Complete Poetical Works.  
p. 36.

2. Samuel T. Pickard. John Greenleaf Whittier. I, 351.





## JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER: A PSYCHOGRAPH

### I. Reformer

When once asked by what poem he would prefer to be remembered, Whittier replied: "I think 'The Reformer',<sup>1</sup> embodies my sentiments."<sup>2</sup>

Now reformers are of two kinds. There are those who discredit the achievements of the past, refute the generally accepted theories of the present, and, rebelling against the established order, desire advancement by revolution. In contrast, there are reformers who appreciate the gains achieved in the past; hope to revitalize certain eternal truths generally given lip service only, or ignored; and anticipate a new and better order through step-by-step advancement and gradual change. The latter more conservative reformer may be just as ardent as the former, the radical; he is more likely to have acquired through his study of history a broader understanding of man in his strength and his failings; he is more likely to be concerned with attacking certain specific wrongs; he is less

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1. John Greenleaf Whittier. Complete Poetical Works, p. 364.

2. Samuel T. Pickard. John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 351.





likely to have a selfish, ambitious, personal stake in the establishment of a new order.

Whittier was a reformer of the second type who, accepting the general pattern of American democracy and the religion of his family, never feared to strike out at specific evils anywhere. He believed that after the "Strong One's Stroke" had been accomplished

'Twas but the ruin of the bad,--  
The wasting of the wrong and ill;  
Whate'er of good the old time had  
Was living still.<sup>3</sup>

As such a reformer, Whittier was indeed "A brave upright man to whom all English speaking people owe a debt of gratitude,"<sup>4</sup> as Matthew Arnold described him. He was a firm believer in the intrinsic value of all men and the possibilities inherent in all men. No existentialist feels more keenly the necessity for making the most of this life than Whittier did, but he estimated men in the fourth dimension, seeing beyond their present condition their potentialities. In the slave he envisioned the free man, and he realized that slavery did not assume just one form; it might be the social curse that fomented the Civil War, but it might also be any condition--environmental or constitutional--which paralyzed the good in man. To Whittier, somewhere

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3. Complete Poetical Works, p. 365.

4. Annie Adams Fields. Whittier: Notes of His Life and Friendships, p. 64





cellared within the unscrupulous politician was the germ of a humanitarian needing sunlight for its nurture; in the drunkard was a self-respecting human being waiting release; in the tired mill-worker was a potential poet; in every man was a soul to be nourished into full life; and all around were the friends of humanity, good men, reformers, eager to create conditions more favorable for such human growth. Whittier was sure that

Through human hearts, by love of Him controlled,  
Runs now the path of God.<sup>5</sup>

Whittier was thus a champion of man and man's rights, for he believed in the importance of mortal life just as truly as Whitman did. But Whittier took as his pattern of a full life the Biblical pattern. This meant sublimation of personal ambitions in a life of service and sublimation of the physical self in the more important making of the whole man. So while Whitman was crying in an idiom startlingly new to Puritan-trained nineteenth-century ears: "I celebrate myself and sing myself,"<sup>6</sup> Whittier was revoicing the Hebrew prophets, adapting their challenge to moral man to meet the demands of his age. On occasion Whittier was Elijah fearlessly calling down the wrath of God on the Jezebels (usually Ahabs to Whittier) who treacherously nullified man's inalienable rights; sometimes he was Micah,

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5. "The New Exodus," Complete Poetical Works, p. 377.

6. Walt Whitman. "Song of Myself." Complete Poetry and Selected Prose and Letters. p. 26.





discoursing on the valuelessness of religiosity and the essentiality of human kindness; sometimes as Isaiah he exalted the suffering, too-often-forgotten servant and his unselfish work for humanity; and sometimes he was Hosea with a heart bursting with compassion for all, friend and foe alike.

When in the latter years of the last century America canonized Whittier, it was largely in remembrance of his Micaian and Hosean utterances, his poems of true religion and of love of God and family, friends, and familiar scenes. The Elijaian blasts of his earlier years were all but forgotten with the disappearance of their provocation, and to many the gray-bearded bard seemed rather a quiet, serene believer, a poised, untroubled spirit, a second Bryant--perhaps more popular, more universally beloved, because of his homely endearing simplicity. So twentieth-century rebellion against conservatism hailed Whitman as its prophet of a fuller life, and Whittier, "the gentle Quaker poet,"<sup>7</sup> was let slip unnoticed into the twilight of the recently out-dated romantic poets of the last century, with only a passing wan smile in recognition of his sincere simplicity.

There was utter simplicity in Whittier's writings and in his life, but not simplicity in the sense of poverty of ideas

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7. Desmond Powell. "Whittier: The Gentle Quaker Poet." American Literature IX (1937), 335-342.





or emotions, but of purity of purpose. Like Confucius, he desired first to set his own life right, that next his household, then his state, then the world might be rightly ordered. Being a Quaker, Whittier first squared his life by the Inner Light, after which it followed that in Haverhill and Amesbury, New England and Washington, London and South America, his influence was felt. When he heard a clear call to witness, he whispered-- or he thundered. He has been criticized for writing too much and too carelessly; yet as a true Quaker, he often kept silent when urged to speak and waited until the Spirit demanded expression. If the twentieth century hates sham, prefers rebellion to curtailment of liberty, desires freedom of conscience and equal opportunity that all men may live to the full, admires personal heroism and devotion to duty, advocates social reform for human betterment, then the twentieth-century reader should become better acquainted with Whittier, for he is a kindred spirit.

Born in Haverhill, Massachusetts, December 17, 1809, John Greenleaf Whittier was the second child of John Whittier, whose forbears had been in New England two hundred years. Neither affluent nor extremely poor, John Whittier owned and worked his own farm. He was a selectman of the town and was an ardent Quaker, both by birthright and conviction. His roof sheltered not only his wife, and eventually four children, but also his





wife's unmarried sister and his own bachelor brother. There were also frequent visitors, such as Harriet Livermore, "the vixen and the devotee,"<sup>8</sup> and passing Friends on their annual journey to the Providence Meeting. Thus, although

no social smoke  
Curled over woods of snow-hung oak<sup>9</sup>

in neighborly greeting, the Whittier children did not grow up entirely out of contact with the world beyond.

Greenleaf attended the District School, read avidly, and catalogued in verse his father's meager library, mastered the rudiments of household chores, and shared with his father and Uncle Moses the work in the barns and fields. An early enthusiasm for poetry was whetted by hearing and reading Burns's poems, for the material as well as the simplicity of style of the Scottish poet struck a responsive chord in him. Among the few books available, Whittier read and reread the Bible, mastering its text and message so completely that his writings are permeated with Biblical allusions and ideas.

In 1826 Greenleaf's older sister secretly sent one of his verses to the local paper whose editor, William Lloyd Garrison, not only published the poem but sought out the author and encouraged him to enter the Haverhill Academy, just about to be

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8. "Snow-Bound," Complete Poetical Works, p. 404.

9. Ibid., p. 400.





opened. Skeptical of the wisdom of this venture, since Greenleaf would have to finance this schooling himself, his father rather reluctantly consented. Perhaps one deciding factor was the fact that Greenleaf had recently overstrained himself at heavy farm work. At the dedication of the Academy, Whittier read an original poem, thus becoming Haverhill's poet laureate at the age of nineteen. He attended the Academy two terms, doing bookkeeping and shoemaking on the side, and, between terms, teaching to support himself. This short period at the Academy marked the end of his formal education.

In 1829, upon Garrison's recommendation, Whittier became editor of the American Manufacturer in Boston. Here he met several important persons, became interested in politics and studied political economy, and enjoyed to the full the opportunity to use the large libraries in Boston. After several months in Boston, he was recalled to Haverhill by his father's illness and consequent death. He edited local papers temporarily until offered, in June, 1830, the editorship of the New England Review of Hartford. It is very difficult to identify all the unsigned and fictitiously signed editorials, sketches, book reviews, short stories, and poems which fell from Whittier's hurrying pen during his three years of editorships. He put so much of himself into the periodicals during these three years that these writings are significant documents in the study of his life. Yet comparatively little of the flood remains, for,





later Whittier had a mania for destroying his early writings. However poorly written in comparison to later works, these writings were popular, we know, for in 1828 the New England Review prophesied he would become famous, and in 1829 the Saturday Evening Post apologized to Whittier for having printed a plagiarized poem. His reputation had grown so rapidly that "if he had not been absolutely puff-proof, he must have become dangerously inflated."<sup>10</sup>

In 1831 Legends of New England--his first book of poems--was published. In 1832 ill health made departure from Hartford to his home necessary, and in 1833, with the removal of outside pressures, Whittier made the most important decision of his life; he came out unequivocally in defense of the unpopular Abolition movement. He attended the first Anti-Slavery Convention in Philadelphia and signed the "Declaration." He wrote "Justice and Expediency," his first forthright attack on slavery, a seasoned, documented argument for abolition as both right and expedient for South as well as North.

From then on Whittier fought slavery--through his occasional writings, his political support (as Massachusetts legislator, lobbyist, and key man behind the scenes), his editorials in the Pennsylvania Freeman, and his contributions to any periodicals

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10. B. M. Stearns. "John Greenleaf Whittier." New England Quarterly XIII (1940), 289.





which dared to print abolition articles. Until the issue was finally decided, this problem commandeered the bulk of Whittier's attention. However, there was a sprinkling of writings of a purely literary nature which demonstrated the growing power of the poet when he was not pressed for time because of the occasion. But the poet's popular appeal had established his reputation, regardless of literary merit or lack of it, long before his masterpiece "Snow-Bound" appeared in 1866 and he had been awarded honorary degrees at Harvard. Financial security, never before his, accompanied fame in the wake of "Snow-Bound." Collections of poems appeared from time to time, financially rewarding as well as heartily applauded. Whatever Whittier wrote reflected his desire for man's well-being, but, compared with the bold prophetic utterances of the days of crusading against slavery, the later poems are mild and restrained.

Whittier's early popularity continued to increase throughout his long lifetime--surprisingly long when one realizes how ill health dogged his footsteps and time and again necessitated the substitution of limited activity on the sidelines for full participation in the arena. After his death, in his eighty-fifth year, the legend of his innocuousness, based on his later poems, grew and prevented his acceptance as an important writer by our sophisticated age. His early stormy career had been all but effaced by his later quietude.





Whittier's circle of friends and activities had contracted as a natural consequence of advancing age, but his intelligent interest in men and affairs persisted to the end. In his eightieth year he was still "correcting a little of the bad grammar and rhythmical blunders which have so long annoyed my friends who have graduated from Harvard instead of a district country school."<sup>11</sup> That same year he refused W. D. Howells his signature to a petition for commutation of the death penalty for alleged anarchists, for he was, although always opposed to capital punishment, disinclined to interfere in one case in preference to others where the convicts were probably less dangerous to the community. In that same year he planted new trees on his land to replace those destroyed by the hard winter. In that year he was "deeply moved by the fact that political and sectional differences seem to have been wholly set aside by the signers"<sup>12</sup> of a portfolio presented him on his eightieth birthday--a portfolio containing a copy of the speech made at the celebration in his honor and autographed by an impressive number of Congressmen, Supreme Court Judges, State Officials, and private citizens.

In those last years honors had been heaped upon Whittier. Among other things he was the poet selected to write a quatrain

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11. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, II, 731.

12. Ibid., p. 727.





for a Milton memorial window for St. Margaret's Church, the church of the House of Commons in London.<sup>13</sup> It was particularly appropriate that Whittier should be chosen, for Whittier had written of the great Puritan: "Blind Milton approaches nearest to my conception of a true hero. Defiant to the last in spite of disastrous ruin of all his hopes."<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes such honors and attentions were a nuisance, as when a large party of Phillips Andover boys, belated by accident, arrived at midnight and called him out of bed to sign their autograph books. As they were leaving, profuse in their thanks, one boy said, "You have only written 'John' in my book." Whittier answered, "I am afraid some of you have not got as much as that." And he took up his candle and said goodnight.<sup>15</sup>

One of the reasons for the poet's immense popularity is shown in this little incident. Whittier was consistently amiable all his life, but he also knew how to be good-humoredly firm.

## II. Politician

The cry of suffering humanity may often be drowned out when ambition is whistling in a young man's ears and the young Whittier was ambitious. He speculated in "New England" in 1830 thus:

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13. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, II, 729.

14. J. G. Whittier. Writings, V, 345.

15. Ibid., p. 702.





If my name  
 Now humble and unwed to fame,  
 Hereafter burn upon the lip  
 . . . . .  
 And over temples wan and grey  
 The star-like crown of glory shine.<sup>16</sup>

For Whittier, this ambitious young man, to become an abolitionist promised no fame, but social and political ostracism and possibly persecution; and Whittier was particularly sensitive to social disapproval. But anti-slavery convictions came natural to Whittier with his Quaker background, and when once he became convinced that he must champion the cause, he consecrated himself with no taint of self-righteousness, putting all his efforts into persuading others to that immediate action he considered right and necessary. Then, for seven years he served within the Anti-Slavery Society, and for twenty more he gave of his time although unofficially until the work was no longer needed.

There is something Pauline in the bearing of this man who set himself to the task of destroying slavery. Like Paul he had a thorn in the flesh; like Paul he made a clear decision which changed his life; like Paul he helped slaves (but did not, like Paul, send them back to their masters!); like Paul he suffered stoning; like Paul he had the priceless gift of moving men to action. His Pauline powers of persuasion were apparent

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16. Whitman, Bennett. Whittier, Bard of Freedom, p. 65.







in his first prose manifesto in the interests of abolition, Justice and Expediency.

There had been times when Whittier had not been meticulous about reporting what he considered unimportant facts. In his legends of New England he had often distorted facts. But when the occasion demanded facts, Whittier was not careless, and Justice and Expediency gave facts. Here were unanswerable reasons why slavery must be dealt with speedily by Congress, not merely through the philanthropic Colonization Society. That society was worse than useless he declared, for it helped the slave-owners by removing freed slaves likely to cause discontent, while it did not prevent the constant slave increase, through extension of territory, illicit slave importation, and slave-breeding. Whittier called for immediate emancipation, pointing out how it had proved safe and successful in other countries. He proved by economic theory and specific cases how free labor was more profitable. His arguments could not be answered; they were conclusive. Since they were so utterly undeniable, they were greatly feared and bitterly attacked. Dr. Reuben Crandall of Washington was imprisoned in Baltimore, and released from confinement only to die of the effects of prison-life, for merely lending Justice and Expediency to a fellow-physician.

So, fearlessly, Whittier entered upon an intense propaganda program, alienating not only, as one would expect, Southern readers, but also many church people of the North who, blindly





believing in the Colonization Society or purposely intending to relieve tensions and stabilize trade relations with the South, had been contributing to the support of the wholly inadequate program of the society. Even the Quakers, always favoring anti-slavery, were quite generally opposed to making an issue of it. With this strongest of all Whittier's prose denunciations he forfeited his political hopes. His literary career too was brushed aside for this just but unpopular cause. He became a reformer thinking of future good and discounting personal gain.

In his later life the poet could look back and, seeing that sacrifice of his early political ambitions in order to further anti-slavery action, instead of ending his career had merely opened another door to success, he could then advise a boy of fifteen: "If thou wouldst win success, join thyself to some unpopular but noble cause."<sup>17</sup> But that insight could only come years later; to the young aspirer his decision must have seemed the burial of his personal hopes. Nine years later, still serving an apparently losing cause, he could write: "The ambitions and the selfish hopes of other years do not disturb me."<sup>18</sup> Yet unquestionably those ambitions had been powerful ones.

In fact, Whittier had anticipated a career in Congress, had been encouraged by his friends, had hopefully watched a long,

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17. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier. I, 122.

18. Ibid., p. 278.





drawn-out deadlock in Essex County politics while the days necessary to his legal age for candidacy decreased, and he had confessed to a correspondent: "I have too many friends around me [to leave Haverhill] and my prospects are too good to be sacrificed to an uncertainty."<sup>19</sup> The "uncertainty" was a promising city editorship. All his letters of that period reveal political ambitions. But in forfeiting his undoubtedly good political prospects, Whittier did not forsake public service. Believing wholeheartedly that "Absurdity is moral action apart from political,"<sup>20</sup> he became an astute politician, but an invisible and almost invincible power, behind the scenes except for one term in the Massachusetts legislature in 1835. Through the years, although without the prestige of an office and without strong support, his influence was decidedly important, and his clever tactics were often successful.

Whittier's political wisdom was grounded in his understanding of men and his faith in men. He took them as he found them, and, not expecting complete agreement, he encouraged them to go part way with him, and he took advantage of every concession they would make for the cause. Sometimes he was disappointed in men, but often he was able to appeal to them, even if on the purely selfish level of political advancement. Thus he made

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19. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier. I, 117.

20. Ibid., p. 186. Greenleaf Whittier, I, 186.





advance by slow steps through the assistance of such men as Rantoul and Cushing. When criticized for dealing with a politician far from wholeheartedly on his side, he replied: "Has thee found any saints or angels in thy dealings with either political party?"<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the politician in Haverhill, observing from a distance, saw more clearly and in better perspective all that was developing. His methods of keeping public servants in line were amazing and amusing; for example, with Cushing. When Cushing as a candidate for Congress needed the Whittier minority support, he refused to make any direct pledges regarding slavery but did compromise by promising to present all petitions his constituents would send him. Cushing was elected and he kept his word, although it proved most embarrassing when he had to read each one of the flood of anti-slavery petitions with which he was besieged. Then Cushing's political strength increased, and, when campaigning in a later election he felt confident of victory without anti-slavery minority support, he refused to renew his former election pledge concerning petitions. He was reelected, but he did not escape Whittier's power. When President Tyler nominated him for a Cabinet post, Whittier published a letter in which Cushing had sidestepped the slavery issue in a compromising manner. Cushing, seen by the administration in

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21. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 188.





an unfavorable light, lost his appointment. Thus the Quaker politician could be Elijah, with his curse throwing a politician who had scorned him to the bears.

Friends were more mildly censured when they erred, but they too were kept in line. "Is that your way of doing business?" Whittier wrote Elizur Wright, and Wright, taking out his feelings in his memo to himself, scribbled on the back of the letter "A blowing up!"<sup>22</sup> And Sumner, never considered a docile man, nor lazy, feebly protested to Whittier: "I shrink from the political labors to which you beckon me. I have been in my seat every day this session. I long for repose and an opportunity for quiet labors."<sup>23</sup>

Blessing was in Whittier's code as well as censure and prodding. "May the good Providence which has overruled the purposes of my life, in this matter give thee strength and grace to do great things for humanity,"<sup>24</sup> he wrote Sumner upon his entering the Senate. Many times he wrote letters of commendation of speeches or actions, and also letters of sympathetic understanding to those in difficult political situations. Truly he never let his representatives feel they were unwatched

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22. Samuel T. Pickard. Whittier as a Politician, p. 30

23. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 365.

24. Ibid., p. 355.





nor unappreciated. In 1837 the Boston Atlas complained that the Quaker poet and certain others were lobbying, "indiscriminately mingled with the members in the Representatives' Hall during the whole debate."<sup>25</sup> The accusation was true, and the direct result was an almost unanimous vote for jury trial for runaway slaves in Massachusetts.

While there was any hope of influencing an opponent, Whittier attempted it. To Robert Rantoul, Democrat, he wrote persuasively; he urged that the slavery issue should not separate Northern parties, that the cause would eventually win, that the rewards for helping a righteous cause could not be estimated; then he added a postscript, an intimate note on his own health and a personal invitation for "tomorrow evening."<sup>26</sup> While there was any hope of anti-slavery action from the Whig or Democratic parties, he opposed a third party, and when in 1840 the Abolitionists considered running a candidate for President, Whittier called it foolish. "I speak confidently on this point," he said.<sup>27</sup> His good advice was ignored this time, and the candidate went down to ignominious defeat as Whittier had foreseen.

While engaged in supporting or helping to defeat candidates for key places in national government, Whittier never underestimated the value of local politics. Neither illness nor storm

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25. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 290.

26. Ibid., p. 200

27. Pickard, Whittier as a Politician, p. 27.





prevented his attending town meetings. When Southern Congressmen objected to so many Haverhill petitions being read in the House and threatened dissolution of the Union if the right of petition on slavery were not denied, another Haverhill petition was presented in rebuke through John Quincy Adams--a petition to dissolve the Union of the States peaceably, since a union between such unequally yoked sections could never be agreeable (to the North), profitable (to the North), nor permanent. Only one of the innumerable Haverhill and Amesbury petitions was wholly denied a reading in Congress. That too was a satirical rebuke, a rebuke to those who had objected to so many women's signatures on the anti-slavery petitions. This petition, which never was read because even the liberal John Quincy Adams refused to read it, suggested that Queen Victoria be advised to consider abdication, since women's sphere was not the world of public affairs.

Whittier's humor and his influence is seen behind such facetious documents, but it was in a wholly serious vein that he addressed a meeting of Amesbury and Salisbury citizens after Sumner had been attacked in the Senate. Then he counselled "no railing nor threats," but "Forget, forgive, unite," for "our business is with poll-boxes, not cartridge-boxes; with ballots, not bullets."<sup>28</sup>

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28. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 382.





A good politician, Whittier did not scorn the lowliest voter. Once he made a deal with a confirmed drunkard to take him to the polls in exchange for his vote. The inebriate was already half intoxicated when they started, and Whittier had to help him to the polls and give him the right ballot. At the very last moment, however, the fellow accepted another ballot and registered an opposition vote. When asked if he had taken the fellow home, Whittier smiled and replied: "Oh, yes. I had promised his wife I would see him safely home, and I had to do it."<sup>29</sup>

So partly unconsciously by being himself so sincerely and wholeheartedly devoted to the betterment of man through political action, with no personal ends to achieve, and partly consciously by shrewdly using his knowledge of men and movements in clever wire-pulling at the opportune moment, Whittier influenced the politics of his town, his district, his state, his nation. In the interests of mankind "a poet had seized the balance of power."<sup>30</sup>

### III. Abolitionist and Social Reformer

The emancipation of the black man, as we have seen, was Whittier's main reason for entering politics, and until that

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29. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 191.

30. Whitman Bennett. Whittier, Bard of Freedom, p. 78.





was achieved he gave slight attention to any other social issues. As a delegate from the Boston Y M C A to the First National Anti-Slavery Convention, he had helped formulate the "Declaration of Sentiments" which preached a crusade against slavery, advocating peaceful methods, yet paradoxically urging steps which eventually contributed to the causes of war. "I set a higher value on my name as appended to the Anti-Slavery Declaration of 1833, than in the title page of any book,"<sup>31</sup> he said many years later, and a facsimile of this valued document always hung in a conspicuous place in his home.

At the beginning of the crusade against slavery, in Justice and Expediency, he had said: "Let the facts speak!"<sup>32</sup> His idealism was never divorced from reality, and again and again he publicized facts--facts which shocked him and therefore he felt must shock others; the hunting of fugitives like animals, the inhumanity of slave-owners, lack of protection of freed negroes, illegal but protected traffic, mob violence in border states, persecution of abolitionist sympathizers in Southern states, lawless attack and arson in Northern states, churchly condoning of such sins against humanity. These facts incorporated in violent verse were printed by the thousands by the anti-slavery press and broadcast across the nation. There were the

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31. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 136.

32. Bennett, Whittier, Bard of Freedom, p. 84.





patently abolitionist poems as "Our Fellow Countrymen In Chains,"<sup>33</sup> "Moloch in State Street,"<sup>34</sup> and "The Slave Ship."<sup>35</sup> Others, just as strong for freedom, were less direct in approach, as "The Song of the Vermonters,"<sup>36</sup> or a "Hymn Written for a Sabbath School Fourth of July Celebration,"<sup>37</sup> the first stanza of which is quite ordinary.

O Thou, whose spirit went before  
Our fathers in their weary way,  
As with Thy chosen moved of yore  
The fire by night--the cloud by day!

But it ends with a typical Whittier picture.

When smitten at with fire from heaven,  
The captives chains shall sink in dust;  
And to his fettered soul be given  
The glorious freedom of the just.

Prose writings carried the message too. "Margaret Smith's Journal"<sup>38</sup> tells so convincingly the story of the mistress's astonishment upon discovery that her slave-girl would really prefer freedom to serving her that one suspects Ben Ames Williams, in House Divided and other modern authors to have borrowed rather heavily from Whittier.

The Quaker restraint one usually associates with Whittier was not apparent when his passion for human rights was foremost.

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33. Bennett, Whittier, Bard of Freedom, p. 88.

34. Complete Poetical Works, p. 314.

35. Ibid., p. 265.

36. Ibid., p. 509.

37. Bennett, Whittier, Bard of Freedom, p. 86.

38. Writings, V, 1.





Invariably, close on the heels of a disturbing incident followed his dramatic presentation of it, and emotions too strong to curb found their way into moving lines.

Be, if ye will, the scandal of the universe:  
We wash our hands forever of your sin and shame and curse.<sup>39</sup>

Such a denunciation could do nothing but antagonize, yet Whittier's sustained hope was to force recognition of the problem so that "with the strong upward tendencies and god-like soul of man"<sup>40</sup> the question would be wrestled with and rightly resolved. His declared program was gradual emancipation, to begin immediately wherever constitutionally permissible, together with Congressional action for the District of Columbia and the territories, and elimination of all flagrant malpractices of the slave system throughout the entire United States. Whittier saw this program as wholly rational and workable; he believed that others had only to see it to be convinced too.

To persuade to such a course Whittier did not sit in an ivory tower and dissipate his emotions in incendiary poetry. He did much more than write. Conferences and policy-making in anti-slavery groups, attempted reform of his own party and (as a last resort) forming the Liberty Party, the writing of innumerable letters (both party communications and personal appeals),

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<sup>39</sup>. "Massachusetts to Virginia." Complete Poetical Works, p. 288.

<sup>40</sup>. Writings, VI, XII.





working with Garrison until the more radical "Garrison, with equal sincerity, judged and counseled otherwise"<sup>41</sup> than the use of the ballot-box, helping operate an abolitionist lecture service, and being ready at any hour to assist in Underground Railroad operation--all were in his program.

As editor of the Freeman, with editorial rooms located in the scarcely finished Pennsylvania Hall designed to house anti-slavery organizations, he witnessed the "smoking sacrifice to the Demon Slavery"<sup>42</sup> after the attacking mob had been assured by the Philadelphia mayor that they need fear no official interference with their plans to destroy the building. As the building burned, he helped salvage records and other valuables. Once at Concord he had barely escaped from an angry mob; he had been pelted with rotten eggs and stones, and he never forgot the sound of the stones striking the wooden fence as he ran past, the sound reminding him of Paul, thrice stoned. He realized his "escape with nothing worse than a few bruises was something to be thankful for."<sup>43</sup>

Whittier did all in his power to help those who suffered for the anti-slavery cause. One such was Charles Torrey, "an esteemed citizen of the state," "a faithful and self-sacrificing

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41. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 234.

42. Ibid., p. 143.

43. Ibid., p. 150





abolitionist," "late pastor of a Congregational meeting in Salem." He was arrested and confined in jail on the charge of aiding slaves on their way to freedom. Whittier wrote in his behalf to Thomas Clarkson: "Let him have the prayers and sympathies of the friends of Freedom . . . . His humanity is his crime, his obedience to the commands of Holy Writ."<sup>44</sup>

Whittier did not enlarge on his own unpleasant experiences; instead he slyly poked fun at those who later posed as martyrs to the cause. However he did confess: "I was quite unwilling to undergo a martyrdom which my best friends could scarcely refrain from laughing at,"<sup>45</sup> and he was referring to a popular argument of the time--tar and feathers. He had come close to a similar indignity in Concord. Years later, from one of the crowd that had pursued him at that time, he learned their intention had they caught him. They had proposed to dip him and his companion, George Thompson, the British reformer, in an "indelible dye."<sup>46</sup>

Simplicity of purpose--wholehearted service for mankind--was the keynote of Whittier's fearlessness in the cause. He had no official position to protect, no salary to maintain, no

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<sup>44</sup> Earl Leslie Griggs. "John Greenleaf Whittier and Thomas Clarkson." American Literature VIII, (1936), 459.

<sup>45</sup> Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 156.

<sup>46</sup> B. O. Flower. Whittier: Prophet, Seer and Man, p. 58.





riders to attach to the bill to destroy slavery. All he desired was to see the evil institution obliterated--to see all American people free. Secret dream and public action were all of one piece and he could truly pray with Andrew Rykman:

Make my mortal dreams come true,<sup>47</sup>  
With the work I fain would do.

Such a whole-souled leader cannot but be a forceful leader. Garrison might rail at him when they parted after policy disagreement, but Whittier recognized that each "acting from a sense of individual duty and responsibility," could hold differing opinions, and he admitted that "We were but fallible men and doubtless often erred in feeling, speech, and action."<sup>48</sup> Although recognizing the possibility of error, Whittier was not apologetic in his statements; his approach had all the appearance of extreme self-confidence. "Kindle up the latent enthusiasm of the Yankee character, call out the grim fanaticism of the Puritan. Dare! DARE! DARE!"<sup>49</sup> he advised Sumner.

Whittier's enthusiasm never flagged. His health and strength might fail him at times, but his zeal for emancipation never did. Once he refused an executive position in an abolitionist organization and Elizabeth Nicholson, a personal friend and ardent abolitionist, with a frankness she might have caught

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47. "Andrew Rykman's Prayer," Complete Poetical Works, p. 439.

48. Writings, VI, XII.

49. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 332.





from Whittier himself, registered her protest in verse.

Furl, furl your proud standard! Let Liberty mourn,  
 And in silence and sadness your banners be borne!  
 For the foremost among ye--the pride of your field--  
 Crestfallen and weary, now rests on his shield.  
 And they gathered from near--and they hastened from far--  
 Like the Magi they followed one glorious star;  
 But the poet from all his high visions came down  
 To a Quaker Convention at old Germantown!

However, finding that Whittier's ardor had not abated in the slightest degree, she then added four other verses, ending with

Then 'weary' perhaps, but 'crestfallen' never  
 The lyrics of Freedom they flourish forever!  
 And Liberty's harp-strings, they gather no rust,  
 Till the hand that awakened them is cold in the dust!<sup>50</sup>

Whittier's major crusade, emancipation of the slave, crowded all other social issues into the borders of his thinking, yet he was always alert--always a reformer--whenever human rights were at stake. He was twelve years ahead of social change in the Salisbury strike of 1852 when he declared: "The ten-hour bill has realized the hopes of its promoters"<sup>51</sup> where tried. Contrasted with the fourteen-hour policy of the Salisbury Manufacturing Company then in operation, which according to Whittier was "breaking down the health of overworked men and women and entailed debility and disease upon their offspring," his suggestion was not only progressive but radical.

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50. Bennett: Whittier Bard of Freedom, p. 168.

51. Thomas Franklin Currier. "Whittier and the Amesbury--Salisbury Strike." U. S. A. Library Quarterly IV (1934), 108.







His "Songs of Labor" have been cited as complacent idealization of working conditions. Whittier honored the worker. He too had rapped with "the polished hammer"<sup>52</sup> on shoes sent out from the factory to be done in homes. He knew by experience that the worker was worthy of his hire. He preferred voluntary action by owners and directors to improve factory conditions, but since that could scarcely be hoped for, he said the legislature must provide a remedy.

As early as 1836 in the Essex Gazette he had condemned Judge Edwards' decision against labor: "To brand laborers as criminal for peaceably requiring an increase of their wages, we hold to be an outrage in the rights of man, and a disgrace to a community professing to be free."<sup>53</sup>

The social experiments of Robert Dale Owen interested him. Whittier was not a Marxian but anxious to obtain reasonable privileges for the poor man, not through revolution but gradual evolution. But without doubt he believed the working man should earn his wages. He had inherited from his father the feeling: "There are the Lord's poor and the Devil's poor; there ought to be a distinction made between them by the overseers of the poor."<sup>54</sup>

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52. "The Shoemakers." Complete Poetical Works, p. 358.

53. J. A. Pollard. "Whittier on Labor Unions." New England Quarterly XII (1939), 102.

54. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 7.





Whittier's investigation of conditions in Lowell ended with no satisfied acceptance of the idea of unadulterated good in the modern miracles he had witnessed. Hear his timeless observation: "After all it may well be questioned whether this gospel, according to Poor Richard's Almanac, is precisely calculated for the redemption of humanity. Labor, graduated to man's simple wants, necessities, and unperverted tastes, is doubtless well; but all beyond this is weariness to flesh and spirit. Every web which falls from these restless looms has a history more or less connected with sin and suffering, beginning with slavery and ending with overwork and premature death."<sup>55</sup>

And no less objectionable to him was the undemocratic spirit fostered by the mill set-up, for those "who have scarcely washed from their own hands the soil of labor look upon their employees as of another species and show amazement that essays may be written and carpets woven by the same set of fingers."<sup>56</sup>

If the city was not idyllic, neither was the village. "Among The Hills"<sup>57</sup> was a half century ahead of Alice Adams and Miss Lulu Bett in pointing that out.

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55. Writings, V, 352.

56. Ibid., p. 380.

57. Complete Poetical Works, p. 83.





How wearily the grind of toil goes on  
 Where love is wanting, how the eye and ear  
 And heart are starved among the plenitude  
 Of nature, and how hard and colorless  
 Is life without an atmosphere. I look  
 Across the lapse of half a century,  
 And call to mind old homesteads, where no flower  
 Told that the spring had come, but evil weeks,  
 Nightshade and rough-leaved burdock in the place  
 Of the sweet doorway greeting of the rose  
 And honeysuckle, where the house walls seemed  
 Blistering in sun, without a tree or vine  
 To cast the tremulous shadow of its leaves  
 Across the curtainless windows, from whose panes  
 Fluttered the signal rags of shiftlessness.

Other social needs challenged Whittier. Consistently against capital punishment, he nevertheless refused to petition to save an anarchist's life. He always stood for changing the law, not setting it aside. His sympathies went out to Hungary suffering under "an avalanche of Russian barbarism,"<sup>58</sup> and he helped raise an emergency fund for famine-ridden Ireland.

While "The Grave By the Lake,"<sup>59</sup> "On Receiving an Eagle's Feather,"<sup>60</sup> "Mount Agiochook,"<sup>61</sup> and other poems glorify the romantically noble savage, he also pictured the real Indian of the past in "Margaret Smith's Journal." Margaret writes after visiting the Indians: "These poor heathen seem not so exceedingly bad as they are reported; they be like unto ourselves."<sup>62</sup>

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58. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 348.

59. Complete Poetical Works, p. 247.

60. Ibid., p. 144.

61. Ibid., p. 490.

62. Writings, V, 178.





He realized the problems of the modern Indian too, was interested in legislation to relieve the situation,<sup>63</sup> and heartily endorsed "the experiment of the education of both classes in General Armstrong's Institution at Hampton, Virginia."<sup>64</sup>

"I go the whole length as regards the rights of women," he said, "although I sometimes joke a little about it. I am afraid it is a besetting sin of mine to do so in reference to many things in which I feel a sober interest."<sup>65</sup> This was not merely idle talk; he was available for addresses at such gatherings as the Woman's Rights Convention. One of the good features of the Lowell factories in his estimation was that "the labor of woman is placed essentially upon an equality with that of man . . . the work of her hands is adequately rewarded."<sup>66</sup> We might add "If," like Dr. Singletary, "he sometimes speculates falsely, he lives truly."<sup>67</sup>

Whittier pictured with indignation any persecutions of Quakers, debtors, or other sufferers in society in the past or present. It has sometimes been claimed that there has been no sympathetic portraiture of foreigners in America before 1900,

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63. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, II, 63.

64. James Almus Russell. "The Original Element in Whittier's Writings." Granite Monthly LX (1928), 219.

65. Ibid., p. 218.

66. Writings, V, 39.

67. Ibid., p. 209.





but in his report on Lowell, Whittier pictures the "Scotchman, the transatlantic Yankee," the "blue-eyed, fair-haired German," the "pedlars from Hamburg and Bavaria and Poland, with their sharp Jewish faces, and black, keen eyes" and "the Swiss maidens grinding music for a livelihood," and he warns: "Ye shall not oppress the stranger; for ye know the heart of the stranger, seeing that ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."<sup>68</sup>

Of war Whittier had "an invincible horror" and he thanked God that he was "not one of those who look on blood and carnage with composure."<sup>69</sup> When Sumner delivered his famous Fourth of July oration Whittier wrote him: "I would rather be the author of it than of all the war eloquence of Heathendom and Christendom combined."<sup>70</sup>

A contemporary author, who not until many years later became a close personal friend of the poet, wrote of him: "Most poets are content to follow the spirit of their age, as pigeons follow a leaky grain cart, picking a kernel here and there out of the dry dust of the past. Not so Whittier. From the heart of the onset among the serried mercenaries of every tyranny, the chords of his iron-strung lyre clang with a martial triumphant cheer."<sup>71</sup>

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68. Writings, Vol. V. 356.

69. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 308.

70. Loc. cit.

71. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 298.





Or, as Whittier described another reformer, we may picture him, one who first sensed, then attacked wrong wherever he saw it.

Yet here at least an earnest sense  
Of human right and weal is shown;  
A hate of tyranny intense,  
And hearty in its vehemence,  
As if my brother's pain and sorrow were my own.<sup>72</sup>

#### IV. Friend

With his intimate friends Whittier was not consciously the reformer, although the note of idealism is always present in what he says and does. His voluminous correspondence with a host of men and women bears witness to an absence of formality and reserve, an immediate offering of sincerity and intimacy, a frank sharing of thoughts as between equals. There are letters of commendation and suggestion, letters of condolence and congratulation, letters about promotion of philanthropies and help in personal matters, letters of appreciation and many unclassifiable letters--spontaneous, just to keep friendships green. All of them reflect the warmth of sympathetic, understanding sensitivity.

"I believe in the holy realities of friendship," Whittier wrote Mrs. Sigourney, "and that, in proportion as we draw near

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72. Complete Poetical Works, p. 1.





to each other in the holy communion and unforbidden love of earthly friendship, we lessen the distance between our spirits and the Original Source,--just as the radii of a circle in approaching each other approach also their common center."<sup>73</sup>

Whether friend or stranger, one might expect of the poet a kindly and honest review of his work. Frankly he advised against dependence on writing for a living, but he criticized, encouraged, and whenever possible recommended the aspiring author to a publisher. One infers that his encouragement of his friends' literary ambitions became annoying to the publishers, for in a letter to Mr. Allinson concerning his daughter's poetry he writes: "There are fine verses and lines and the whole poem has the religious solemnity and dignity which befits the subject. Yet I do not feel at liberty to offer it to the Atlantic having heretofore offended some for poems sent me by friends to no effect, and having even been requested not to do it."<sup>74</sup> Long is the list of budding writers who looked to him for encouragement.

In his home town, contrary to the proverb, Whittier was honored and loved. The villagers looked forward to his calls, perhaps at the general store where he would sit on a cracker

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73. Writings, V, 113.

74. Edward D. Snyder. "John Greenleaf Whittier to William J. Allinson." Friends' Historical Association Bulletin XXXVII (1948), 17.





barrel and discuss the weather or politics, thoughtfully remembering to ask about the ailing father or the younger sister who was so proud to be a member in the same literary circle as Elizabeth Whittier. Truly sympathetic, Whittier seemed to sense the needs of his friends. Sometimes it was money that was needed, and then an occasion was planned to present the gift without any suggestion of charity. Sometimes it was an explanation to make clear an ambiguous situation, as when he wrote Howells the true import of an interview which, poorly reported, seemed to imply that Whittier had criticized Howells. Sometimes it was the new perspective, possibly a touch of humor, as when seeing the Calvinist, Joshua Coffin, approaching death overwhelmed by fear of the Judgment Day, Whittier had characteristically suggested: "Now Joshua, thee is going to Hell with a heart full of love for everybody. What can the Devil find for such a one as thee to do?"<sup>75</sup> Even Joshua had to laugh at that ridiculous situation and he felt better.

Sometimes it was a story to take a child's mind off the tragedy of being laughed at. When over seventy he spoke of his childish fear of a certain gander, and he remarked that more serious concern should be given to children's troubles. Love of people and a clear memory of his own times of discouragement, fear, and perplexity combined to make him a comforter.

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75. Bennett: Bard of Freedom, p. 320. actions. (1893). p. 55.





The stories seem countless of Whittier's thoughtfulness and generosity. When Kate Choate, the neighborhood washer-woman, had built a comfortable house, he joined with the neighbors in giving her a housewarming with gifts, including parlor furniture, and--to celebrate the occasion fittingly--a poem in her honor.

Among many who considered Whittier a delightful companion were those to whom he had given practical help, like Lucy Larcom, Alice and Phoebe Carey, and Mrs. Southworth. He also had wealthy, influential friends, such a Celia Thaxter, whose home was always open to him. Famous men like Henry Ward Beecher and Phillips sat at his tea table and then at his request lectured at the Amesbury Lyceum. Don Pedro of Brazil, international figure of his day and guest of honor at a Boston reception, was unsatisfied until he had met Whittier, several of whose poems he had translated. And John Bright is quoted as saying to an American visitor: "I would rather see Mr. Whittier than any other man in your country. If I go to America I will see him first."<sup>76</sup>

Although Whittier believed in the equality of all men and found enjoyment in a wide and varied circle of friends, we are told that he was ill at ease with the Concord poets, although he had great admiration for them. Apparently he felt self-conscious

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76. Mary B. Claflin. Personal Recollections. (1893), p. 55.





in the presence of these literary critics. "A boyish diffidence, which manhood has not been able to forget, and a most unpardonable lack of words,--a want of the ready coin,--the circulating medium of conversation,--have, I am well aware, too often made me appear cold, distant, and as incapable of appreciating the delicate attentions and generous sympathies of friendship as of returning them."<sup>77</sup>

The poet never entirely forgot that his education had been limited, and no doubt that induced his self-consciousness. However his friends apparently did not feel any inadequacy in him, for there are many to witness their delight in his company. A northeaster could not prevent Lowell and Taylor from taking their planned trip to Amesbury, and Taylor reports: "What a capital time we had with Whittier with the rain pouring on the roof and the wind howling at the door!"<sup>78</sup>

Whittier pictured three of his closest friends--Edwin Whipple, Bayard Taylor, and James T. Fields--in "The Tent on the Beach,"<sup>79</sup> but his friendships were innumerable and enduring. One reason for this was that a friend under criticism was to Whittier a person to be defended. "Say nothing disparaging of

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77. Writings, VI, 112.

78. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 361.

79. Complete Poetical Works, p. 242.





Mr. Thayer," he said. "He is on the wrong side, but he does pretty well with a bad cause."<sup>80</sup> And again: "I love Beecher and believe in him. He has done good to thousands. If he has fallen into temptation I shall feel grieved, but would be ashamed of myself were I less his friend."<sup>81</sup> This attitude sheds light on Prentice's remark: "No rational man can ever be the enemy of Mr. Whittier."<sup>82</sup>

Like Longfellow, Whittier was very generous in his evaluation of his contemporaries. He praised them without the thieving if's and but's, and his comments were often expressed in superlatives. Of Longfellow's Tales of a Wayside Inn he said, "Neither Boccaccio nor Chaucer has done better."<sup>83</sup> Lucy Larcom's writings "remind me of the German writer Lessing."<sup>84</sup> Hosea Biglow had produced "a grand book--the best of its kind in the last half century or more. It has wit enough to make the reputation of a dozen English satirists."<sup>85</sup>

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80. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I. 78.

81. Chauncey J. Hawkins. The Mind of Whittier, New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1898.

82. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 80.

83. Annie A. Fields. Whittier: Notes of His Life and Friendships, p. 11.

84. Ibid., p. 13.

85. Ibid., p. 11.





These were Whittier's honest opinions. He was not lacking in critical ability or in literary discrimination; it was merely that his warmth of affection for his friends and his appreciation of their potentialities made it very difficult to be objective. Authors he did not know personally he could evaluate more impartially. Of Browning's "Men and Women" he wrote to Lucy Larcom: "Elizabeth thinks it is great, but it seems to me like a galvanic battery in full play--its spasmodic utterances and intense passion . . . a bath among electric eels."<sup>86</sup> Often his criticisms, although invariably leaning toward overestimation, showed wise evaluation as when he singled out "The Chambered Nautilus" as a really great poem.

It is significant that in encouraging his friends Whittier praises always for spiritual goodness and for sincere efforts to help their fellowmen. His yardstick is one's relation to truth. In his sketches of seventeenth century figures, including Thomas Ellwood,<sup>87</sup> Richard Baxter,<sup>88</sup> John Bunyan,<sup>89</sup> and Andrew Marvell,<sup>90</sup> he is picturing men whose uncompromising integrity is a pattern worthy of imitation. So in his poems he commends

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86. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 372.

87. Writings, VI, 37.

88. Ibid., p. 148.

89. Ibid., p. 9.

90. Ibid., p. 89.





Leggett who "pleaded for his captive fellowmen,"<sup>91</sup> Ronge, "the image-breaker,"<sup>92</sup> and Channing, "hero and saint."<sup>93</sup> So too in his personal letters, again and again he commends for moral courage, for active interest in human welfare, for sympathy and understanding. It was an integral part of Whittier--this desire to promote the highest development of each person. Constructive comment became with him a fixed habit.

#### V. Bachelor and Brother

Since Whittier was such a delightfully friendly person, and was a personable young man, both attracted to and attractive to young women, his celibacy has been a favorite subject for speculation. Mordell has gathered a rather impressive collection of the young Whittier's sentimental epistles, added speculative interpretation of his poems which suggest romantic interests, and the evidence of some rather talkative women who professed knowledge of his love-life. With this data he believes he has proved that the poet was disastrously disappointed in love. That he "brooded and brooded, till physical agony and mental torture wrecked him"<sup>94</sup> and that "he condemned the entire sex for the frailties of one or two" and so became a male coquette

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91. Complete Poetical Works, p. 173.

92. Ibid., p. 179.

93. Ibid., p. 180.

94. Mordell, Quaker Militant, p. 61.





and vain philanderer is certainly not proved by the fragmentary Mordell data, fragmentary (not quantitatively but comparatively) when put beside the bulk of convincing evidence that shows his wholesome, irreproachable enjoyment of the company of women and his seemingly normal attitude toward marriage, for which he showed reverent appreciation but no markedly strong feelings for or against, which might be evidence of the hiding of some emotional abnormality.

There was no reason Whittier should have felt marriage a necessity to a complete life. In his immediate family circle were Uncle Moses and Aunt Mercy who held no inferior place in the home because of their unmarried state. And more important, there was his sister Elizabeth of whom Higginson says: "She was a woman never to be forgotten, and no one can truly estimate the long celibate life of the poet without bearing in mind that he had for many years at his own fireside the concentrated wit and sympathy of all womankind in this one sister."<sup>95</sup>

The Whittier family ties were strong--stronger, much stronger than the physical endurance of either Elizabeth or Greenleaf. Mrs. Fields tells us that brother and sister worried so much about each other's health that "it was a question which would die first."<sup>96</sup> That was only one evidence of the warmth of their reciprocal affection.

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95. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 31.

96. Bennett, Whittier, Bard of Freedom, p. 29.





Their home, even when snow-bound, was warm with sympathy and understanding, yet not ingrown nor selfishly exclusive. Aunt Mercy, "The sweetest woman ever fate Perverse denied a household mate,"<sup>97</sup> and Mother Whittier were "typical Quaker women,"<sup>98</sup> affectionately remembered not only by their family but by many outsiders for their gentle manners and willing services in time of need. The older sister Mary's faith in Greenleaf's poetic genius had been responsible for his first published poem, for without his knowledge she had sent it to the local paper. Greenleaf's only brother shared his ambitions in the abolition cause and wrote humorous anti-slavery letters using the pseudonym "Ethan Spike."

Sister Elizabeth, eight years younger than Greenleaf, became her poet-brother's most intimate companion and critic. Unselfishly devoted to him, she shared his home and his enthusiasms. When he went to Philadelphia as an editor, she followed him to be his housekeeper. When the farm in Haverhill became too great a responsibility for the frail poet, Elizabeth, Greenleaf, and their mother moved to Amesbury. Elizabeth was soon president of the Amesbury Woman's Anti-Slavery Society and active in the literary group. When Whittier discovered Lucy Larcom's literary bent and encouraged her, Elizabeth welcomed

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97. "Snow-Bound," Complete Poetical Works, p. 402.

98. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 30.





her in their home and the two women became fast friends. So in every way Elizabeth shared her brother's life and interests.

She was a happy complement for him, easy and affable in social exchange, facile in conversation, lively in manner, while he was inclined to be shy among strangers. When celebrity-seekers became too numerous, Elizabeth often spared him the trouble of an interview by her own generous expenditure of time and effort. In her diary of 1936 we may read: "Many memories and thoughts come crowding in upon me--but at the call from my brother I thrust aside my book, pencil, and sentiment and go to his assistance."<sup>99</sup>

In turn, Whittier valued his sister's opinions and often wrote, "My sister tells me" and "I think she is right."<sup>100</sup> She was central in his thoughts as he in hers. We are told that when he was in a legislative meeting and heard that the Female Anti-Slavery Society had been attacked, he left at once, anxious about his young sister.<sup>101</sup>

Whittier always pointed appreciatively and proudly to the family unity. "My mother always encouraged me and sympathized with me . . . . My father did not oppose me . . . as he was in straightened circumstances he could do nothing to aid me"<sup>102</sup> to

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99. Annie R. Marble. "Elizabeth Whittier and the Amesbury Home." Outlook LXXXVII (1907), 29-35.

100. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, II, 427.

101. Ibid., I, 143.

102. Ibid., I, 52.





go to the Academy. When Whittier resolved that the second term at the Academy must be his last, since he would not pauperize himself to get further education, unquestionably the decision was influenced by anticipation of future family responsibility. When his father died, he not only gave up his editorial position in Boston to help in the family crisis, but he took all his savings and applied them on the farm mortgage. That he had saved anything was in itself remarkable; of his weekly salary of nine dollars he had saved nearly half!

Family obligations never appeared irksome to him, but the combination of limited strength and family burdens made strict economy necessary, and there were several years when it is a question how he succeeded in supporting the family. As late as 1843, when "Lays of My Home" appeared, not only did the book fail to bring him financial reward but he was billed for his own copies--\$8.20!<sup>103</sup> Yet in spite of small and uncertain income he never was in debt. His financial acumen alone could not have done that without family solidarity.

As the years passed there was more money, although real financial success came only after Elizabeth's death, and Whittier regretted his inability to share the easier living with her. But even in the most difficult times "with strict economy we lived comfortably and respectably,"<sup>104</sup> Whittier testifies,

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103. Bennett, Whittier, Bard of Freedom, p. 195.

104. Whittier: Souvenir of Whittier: Whittier Autobiography.





and in time the little Amesbury home was enlarged and improved. The "garden room," planned as the poet's study, became a family sitting-room where we are told he worked with the household affairs going on around him, not only undisturbed but comforted by the family so near.

Whittier's mother's death was to him a "mighty bereavement," and with it "half the motive power of life [was] lost."<sup>105</sup> Six years later when Elizabeth died he was grief-stricken again, but shortly after braced himself with: "I do not intend the old homestead to be gloomy and forbidding through my selfish regrets."<sup>106</sup> Therefore, the first shock of loss over, he set himself to fashioning a family memorial, "Snow-Bound."

Here he proudly presents to us his loved ones with

"the youngest and the dearest  
 . . . . .  
 Now bathed in the unfading green.  
 And holy peace of Paradise."<sup>107</sup>

"The common unrhymed poetry of simple life and country ways"<sup>108</sup> in his mother's stories has its counterpart in the poet's feeling for the homely beauty and the comfort of the much-used everyday possessions which permeates so much of

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105. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, II, 412.

106. Ibid., 480.

107. Complete Poetical Works, p. 398.

108. Loc. Cit.





Whittier's writing: "his oaken flail, . . . the singing birch-logs";<sup>109</sup> "my bowl of milk and bread, . . . pewter spoon and bowl of wood, . . . The doorstone, grey and rude";<sup>110</sup> "the inevitable sampler, . . . low brown roofs and painted eaves";<sup>111</sup> "the mottled cat . . . sitting drowsy in the firelight";<sup>112</sup> "great . . . beams from the ceiling low . . . the long clock . . . ticking . . . on the foot-worn stairs . . . the low broad chimney . . . the crack by the earthquake make a century back."<sup>113</sup>

In such visualization we cannot help realizing more fully the deep attachment the author felt for all that suggested home life. Why then had this man who was so sympathetic, so understanding, so sentimentally sensitive to everything connected with home and family, "refused to marry,"<sup>114</sup> as Mordell avows? Why did he "choose to walk alone all his days?" The answer is that he did not "refuse," nor did he "walk alone," although he did not marry.

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109. "Flowers in Winter," Complete Poetical Works, p. 149.

110. "The Barefoot Boy," Ibid., p. 397.

111. "Among The Hills," Ibid., p. 83.

112. "Mary Garvin," Ibid., p. 49.

113. "The Prophecy of Samuel Sewall," Ibid., p. 68.

114. Mordell, Quaker Militant, p. XVII.





Instead, marriage just did not fit into his life scheme, the symmetry of which was not the result of happy circumstances--of getting all that he might desire. Nor was it mere unimaginative acceptance of what he had, although in later life he did frequently express gratitude for his happy life. No, Whittier was conscious of the limitations of his circumstances. He vibrated with feelings--aspirations, indignations, appreciations--sometimes called sentimentalism, but never characterized as insincerity. He recognized his limitations and resented them, but beginning with what he had and working toward what he could get without sacrificing any scruples, he ordered his life accordingly--not pining for the unattainable things beyond his sphere.

While isolated items in his career may look contradictory, Whittier's motives were consistent, and he left no one in ignorance concerning his goal. While repeated aim and fixed goal do not guarantee all hits and no errors, they suggest a high average of successes. But no one gains mastery over his life in one short practice period, and Whittier was not an exception. In fact, he was rather slow in maturing, partly because of his limited educational advantages and his limited social experiences. When he entered the academy, he had met few young people of his own age; at the academy he had little social life since the hours not used academically were largely spent in earning to meet his expenses. *John Greenleaf Whittier, 75*

Whittier was normally attracted toward girls. In 1829, while in Boston, he wrote to Edward Harriman: "There are a





great many pretty girls at the Athenaeum . . . I like to sit there and remark upon the different figures that go flitting by me like aerial creatures just stooping down to our dull earth . . . . I always did love a pretty girl. Heaven grant there is no harm in it . . . . I am acquainted with a few girls, and have no wish to be so with many."<sup>115</sup> That is rather a mild confession for a young man to make about girls. And how did he appear to them?

One says he was a "very handsome, distinguished-looking young man . . . a bashful youth, but never awkward . . . always kind to children . . . with a real love of fun and keen sense of the ludicrous . . . shrewd, sensitive, practical . . . very modest, never conceited . . . exceedingly conscientious . . . . He cared for people,--quite as much for the plainest and most uncultivated as if they were original . . . and most polished."<sup>116</sup>

Another recalls his "liveliness . . . ready wit . . . perfect courtesy . . . infallible sense of truth and justice."<sup>117</sup> Yet, from his Philadelphia cousin Ann Wendell, we learn, "He was very uncertain; we could never make an engagement and be sure he would be with us."<sup>118</sup> However she testifies how much fun it was when he did spend an evening with them. To this Quaker cousin he wrote intimately and frequently, and once confessed in his

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115. Pickard: John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 93.

116. Underwood, John Greenleaf Whittier, 75.

117. Ibid., p. 73.

118. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 222.





whimsical way an inner confusion seldom suspected. "I can't get 'into the quiet.' Tubal Cain, Jr., master builder on the Babel corporation, was never more bewildered by the confusion of tongues than I am at this moment."<sup>119</sup>

This shy, personable young man, receiving his share or more than his share of attention, partly because rather elusive, was naturally pleased and flattered. But he was not free to marry whenever and whomever he desired. Loyalty to his family and his own recurrent ill-health made thoughts of marriage impractical. A few sentimental letters (silly as they may seem to a third person) do not change the picture. Whittier would be the last to claim he had never taken any foolish steps. "I am sorry to find thee lay so much stress on dragging to light all the foolish things written by me, and which I hate the thought of. For mercy's sake let the dead rest,"<sup>120</sup> he advised his biographer. To Whittier his former self was dead; he destroyed or refused to republish much of his early writing because it did not sound like him; like all of us, he could be amused--or dismayed--at a complete review of past actions.

Mary Emerson Smith was undoubtedly a favorite among his friends when they were young, and he did not want her marriage to sever their friendship. Evelina Bray, whose marriage was unfortunate, found some compensation in remembering that she had

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<sup>119</sup>. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 278.

<sup>120</sup>. Currier, A Bibliography of John Greenleaf Whittier. p. IX.





known the poet in academy days. Lucy Hooper, a poet nine years younger than Whittier, was, according to rumor, engaged to him, but her ill-health alone would have kept them from marriage.

When she succumbed to tuberculosis, Whittier wrote her sister, "I have had few friends so dear to me--so often in my thoughts--as Lucy."<sup>121</sup> Elizabeth Lloyd stood foremost in the group of

congenial young people with whom Whittier came in contact in Philadelphia, but she and the poet appear to be only two-thirds of the triangular friendship which Elizabeth Whittier completed.

Whether this triangle was formed naturally or was directly planned by Whittier or his sister to avoid misunderstanding is not clear. Upon becoming a widow, Elizabeth Lloyd reopened correspondence with Greenleaf: "Ought I to apologize for writing without leave?"<sup>122</sup> Whittier was then in a position where he was

financially able to marry; the correspondence flourished for a time; mutual attraction apparently waxed, then slowly waned:

"I am sorry thee has decided to be such a very ancient man," writes Elizabeth in 1866<sup>123</sup> --and the romance is terminated--if romance there was--with no discredit to either one so far as the incomplete correspondence would indicate. The correspondence is entirely one-sided as Whittier had destroyed Elizabeth's letters at her request.

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121. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 275.

122. Currier, Elizabeth Lloyd and the Whittiers, p. 6.

123. Ibid., p. 146.





Whittier's close companionship with his mother and his sister helped him to understand women and he enjoyed their company. He had a host of women among his friends and admirers. Probably the period during which Whittier was in Philadelphia gave him more of social life than any other period in his life did. His cousins and their friends extended more invitations than he could accept, but he says a dozen years later that he owes much to the "kind encouragement of female friends."<sup>124</sup> The Nicholson Collection, recently loaned indefinitely to Haverford, contains the Whittier Notebooks<sup>125</sup> with copies in Elizabeth Nicholson's handwriting of Whittier's early abolition poems. The manuscripts of the poems had largely been sent by Elizabeth Whittier; Elizabeth Lloyd had made the title page, headings, and illustrations, with the exception of one miniature in color by Elizabeth Smith. So four Elizabeths had collaborated in this work of admiration. Their unusually strong feeling for the poet is duplicated again and again one finds in reading Whittier's life. Elizabeth Nicholson's half-brother is responsible for the story that Whittier wanted to marry her but that she refused. She never married but was a very strong-minded, successful woman with a sense of humor and some writing ability. She and Greenleaf remained friends throughout their lives.

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124. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 70.

125. Edward D. Snyder. "Whittier Returns to Philadelphia after a Hundred Years." Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography LXII (1938), 140ff.





Whittier's affection went out to all his friends without reserve. Perhaps it is strange that more letters showing indiscreet phrasing have not been discovered. Mordell's interpretation of the assembled facts does not square with the known aspects of his life, his character, and his reputation, and although startling contradictions are possible in unintegrated persons, Whittier's life seems too well unified to admit of any such strongly out-of-character tendency.

In the first place, Mordell's interpretation does not square with the reputation of the poet among his contemporaries, who suggest nothing unhealthy in his attitude toward women. Quite the contrary there seems to have been the usual frequent speculation concerning his possible marriage, speculation such as always trails bachelor prospects. Nor does this misogynic interpretation square with Whittier's consistently healthy expressions regarding marriage. Quite frankly he stated in his autobiographical notes that "Circumstances--the care of an aged mother, and the duty owed to a sister in a delicate health for many years"<sup>126</sup> had prevented his early marriage. And in later life, when rumors that he and Elizabeth Lloyd might marry called forth comment, he allayed curiosity with: "I have not married a wife. I will not marry a nurse."<sup>127</sup>

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126. Whittier Souvenir, p. 3.

127. Sparhawk, p. 78.





Foregoing marriage did not, however, make him cynical. When congratulating Fields on his marriage, he wrote: "Were I an autocrat I would see to it that every young man over twenty-five, and every young woman over twenty, were married without delay. Perhaps, on second thought, it might be well to keep one old maid and one old bachelor in each town, by way of warning, just as the Spartans did their drunken Helots."<sup>128</sup>

At another time in writing of his bachelor uncle, he remarks: "There has always been one of that unfortunate class in every generation of our family."<sup>129</sup>

Whittier did not seem to wear the scars of a mortal love-wound; there is considerable evidence that he neither scorned marriage nor overenvied his married friends. He was as frank in comment on this subject as on others, and to a friend who boasted that she was doing nothing to assist her daughter to marry he said, "But thee ought."<sup>130</sup>

To say that necessary foregoing of marriage did not affect the poet's personality adversely does not mean that the young man had no strong desire for a home of his own. It does not deny sublimation, but merely denies defeat because of suppressed desires. No doubt the young poet had his dreams, but he was kept close, literally and figuratively, by family ties; the

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128. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 348.

129. Writings, V, 320.

130. Sparhawk, p. 88.





family planned with him and helped plan for him, and family plans seldom lead to marriage. But Whittier's affection knew no boundaries; he could not be cold and formal with anyone. He might complain: "I am so dreadfully oppressed by my correspondence with strangers that I cannot do justice to my friends,"<sup>131</sup> but the strangers never suspected this.

The man of ready sympathy is most likely to find himself in a compromising situation; informality and intimacy shade into each other; written words carry unexpected overtones--yet, for culling from all of Whittier's voluminous correspondence, the sensation-seeker has little reward--a few Hill's Manual lover's phrases, such as that written when he was very young: "I have only to resign hopes dear to me as life itself, and carry with me hereafter the curse of disappointed feeling."<sup>132</sup>

Nor does a thwarted love-life seem to have affected Whittier's writing. Only a naive person, or a scholar bent on discovering a hitherto hidden fact, would attempt to unravel the mystery of the main springs of a writer's mind which guides him in a choice of subject--much less try to explain a poet's love lyrics.

130. 1843, p. 121.

137. 1843, p. 47.

140. 1843, p. 386.

139. Whittier's Sonnets.

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131. Annie Marble. "Friendships of Whittier," Dial XLIII (1907), 410.

132. Mordell, Quaker Militant, p. 61.





There is expression of the pathos of love-sadness in "My Playmate,"<sup>133</sup> "In School Days,"<sup>134</sup> "A Sea Dream,"<sup>135</sup> "The Henchman,"<sup>136</sup> and "Maud Muller."<sup>137</sup> Considering the quantity of Whittier's poetry, he did not emphasize romantic love unduly. "Memories"<sup>138</sup> is the only love poem in the section "Poems Subjective and Reminiscent" of the 1888 collection. If it reveals his personal youthful romance, it is nothing but what we might expect to find in any normal person's life.

To attribute Whittier's ill health to love-sickness is another wild Freudian assumption. No one knows the cause of the frequent severe head aches which he had suffered from earliest childhood. "For many years I have not been able to read or write, for more than a half hour at a time; often not so long."<sup>139</sup> Without question this condition preceded any love affairs. Throughout the years there were frequent bouts with

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133. Complete Poetical Works, p. 76.

134. Ibid., p. 407.

135. Ibid., p. 160.

136. Ibid., p. 121.

137. Ibid., p. 47.

138. Ibid., p. 386.

139. Whittier Souvenir.

140. Carrier's Bibliography, p. 71.

141. Richard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 97.

142. Carrier, A Bibliography, p. 151.

143. Ibid., p. 451.





ill health, to which the editorships of the New England Review and the Pennsylvania Freeman were forfeited. Invitations to conventions and conferences and excursions had to be declined after long anticipation. By 1826 it is "the old complaint, palpitation of the heart."<sup>140</sup> No doubt as Whittier battled against physical handicaps, the uncertainty of his health and the dread of not being able even to continue his work by mail aggravated his difficulties. But he was no hypochondriac. His difficulties were no escape-phenomena. He loved the work he was often unable to do. "We start vigorously forward," he wrote, "until the mind realizes that drained down to material grossness, and clogged with a distempered and decaying mortality, it cannot rise to heaven . . . . But, oh, how humiliating to the vanity of our nature!"<sup>141</sup>

Working against such odds, he blamed himself "for the leanness of our editorial columns. Well, here we have it in one word--sickness."<sup>142</sup> Yet the quality of his work testified to his will power, for thinking of those same New England Review editorials, Charles Emerson wrote: "Since you have left the paper, it has gradually travelled downhill in the public estimation . . . . It prates dullness sublimated--the genuine unmixed essence of stupidity."<sup>143</sup>

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140. Currier: A Bibliography, p. 71.

141. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 97.

142. Currier, A Bibliography, p. 151.

143. Ibid., p. 451.





At one time the poet was "embargoed for three weeks, and for a week past unable to see, the same persistent influenza having finally taken possession of my eyes."<sup>144</sup> The next year it was "the rheumatism to pay for riding the teeth of the north-west wind from Newburyport."<sup>145</sup> No wonder he remarked: "It sometimes seems strange that I cannot do as others around me,"<sup>146</sup> and later, "I dread to touch a pen. Whenever I do it increases the dull wearing pain in my head, which I am scarcely ever free from."<sup>147</sup>

The doctors today are baffled when attempting to account for headache, but Mordell claims that Whittier's were the result of sexual frustration. Pickard quotes Whittier's own explanation: unnecessary exposure to cold, aiming to toughen the child's constitution, but instead undermining his health. Dr. Gould, reporting his study of all available facts to the American Medical Association, claims that eye strain could have caused the headaches, heart trouble, and insomnia, and the eye-strain theory would account for a decrease of headache and palpitation with the change in sight caused by advancing age. Bennett believes that Whittier's ill health was largely the nervous ailment of a high-strung, ethically idealistic nature in an unusually frail body.

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<sup>144</sup>. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 163.

<sup>145</sup>. Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>146</sup>. Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>147</sup>. Ibid., p. 319.





Certainly Whittier's energy was not equal to the ardor of his spirit, and he was unable to stand the grind of continuous reading and writing. At any job he overworked with characteristic concentration to the exhaustion point. While he was being advised against going to the London conference, such a trip might have afforded just the healthful relaxation he needed. Or perhaps he needed Vitamin B! Yet Whittier learned to make progress without robust health. Just as he had accepted the handicaps of limited education and slender financial resources and had surmounted them, so he adjusted his life to conserve his precarious health. Doing without had always been a condition of Whittier's very existence, yet he did not magnify his handicaps. Like Paul, he had learned in whatever circumstances he found himself to be content; also like Paul, he did not leave his friends unaware of his physical hindrances.

Perhaps the soundest refutation of the Freudian analysis is the great body of evidence we have of Whittier's enduring friendships with the very persons it is suggested he had grievously wronged, for passionate attachments are prone to burn themselves out quickly or linger in bitter reproaches. His friendships lived on.

Given a greater degree of health, less family responsibility, or a less lively conscience, Whittier might have married. As it was, he continued his bachelor existence with thoughts of marriage crowded into the fringes of his consciousness, while politics, a writer's ambition, and family problems, almost more







than his frail body could carry, occupied his thoughts until middle years. When he at last found himself in a position to consider marriage, he had lost any strong desire for it. Two factors account for the question being raised again and again: first, the contrast of his bachelor existence with the lives of the majority of his literary contemporaries in America, men who exemplified the most blissful of wedded lives; and secondly, the modern attempt to explain the behavior of all persons according to Freudian postulates.

In "The First Flowers,"<sup>148</sup> Whittier whimsically suggests the futility of just such speculation.

So, when this fluid age we live in  
Shall stiffen round my careless rhyme,  
Who made the vagrant tracks may puzzle  
The savants of the coming time;

And, following out their dim suggestions,  
Some idly-curious hand may draw  
My doubtful portraiture, as Cuvier  
Drew fish and bird from fin and claw.

And maidens in the far-off twilights,  
Singing my words to breeze and stream,  
Shall wonder if the old-time Mary  
Were real, or the rhymers' dream!

#### VI. Aspiring Author

Whittier managed to achieve a full life without marriage, just as he had learned to accept his other limitations. But he

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<sup>148</sup>. Complete Poetical Works, p. 153.

<sup>149</sup>. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 147.





was not born to passive acceptance. Impatience with the limitations of his humdrum life had abruptly ended his one boyhood attempt at a diary. Again in impatience he had scribbled on his slate:

And must I always swing the flail,  
And help to fill the milking pail?  
I wish to go away to school;  
I do not wish to be a fool.<sup>149</sup>

Ambition had flared with a new light when he realized that Burns's poems had issued from circumstances not unlike his own. Then, too, we can imagine the admiration of the women of his family fanning the flame. Then came Garrison's interest, the first poems in print, and the academy-dedicatory ode. Whittier was being encouraged to write while his critical sense was scarcely born. Yet one wonders whether it was modesty or recognition of the blemishes of these early poems which prompted the use of "Adrian," "Donald," "Peter," "Ichabod," "Nehemiah," and other pseudonyms for the two hundred or more poems he had written by 1828 for the Haverhill Gazette, the Boston Courier, and a half dozen other periodicals. Together with the flood of editorials, book reviews, short stories, and sketches written in these early years, these writings reflect a young man trying to find himself; a writer with many passing ideas and interests, but no controlling principle; a romanticist thinking his ordinary life dull,--so choosing subjects strange, weird, and horrible

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<sup>149</sup>. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 147.





like "The Opium Eater."<sup>150</sup> As a young poet he was admiring and sometimes imitating Byron, Scott, Burns, and Coleridge. In later years Whittier had a mania for collecting and destroying his bad early work, for Whittier grew amazingly in literary stature; and there were at least two major reasons for his growth, each of them dependent upon a growth in personality.

The year 1833 was the year of Whittier's greatest decision. Temporarily isolated in Haverhill because of ill health, given time to survey his life, he took the step which gave his life dominant purpose; he came out for abolition of slavery. From then on Whittier did much for the cause, but the cause did much for him. It made him nationally known, but more important than that, it helped him find himself as a person, for it has been said that in time to come "Whittier will be remembered even more as the trumpet voice of Emancipation, than as the peaceful singer of rural New England."<sup>151</sup>

This vital decision of 1833 did not make a great artist of Whittier, but with a powerful purpose in mind he did drop all attempts at sophistication, and from then on a poignant sincerity pervaded his works. Basic truths, simply stated or unfolded in episodes, were the center of each piece of writing. There were no feigned emotions and no unreal persons. The poem might be obviously propagandist melodrama and end with a moral tag, but

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150. Writings, V, 278.

151. W. C. Lawton. The New England Poets, p. 155.





whatever the blemishes and artistic faults, the poems were purposeful and intense. In each poem the man himself was speaking. For nearly thirty years in moving exhortations and satirical reproaches he poured himself out in poetry, commended throughout the nation except by the victims of his stinging verse.

Although his propagandist poems may seem cheap political jingles today, and the author so criticized them himself later, they were singularly effective as the sincere expressions of a patriotic propagandist. But it took another severe illness in 1839 and 1840--the most severe of his whole life--to make him a literary artist. Again enforced inactivity and isolation gave him a new perspective. Throughout the years he had been learning to write by writing, but as he now reviewed his work he realized that his occasional poems were in demand because of their timeliness rather than their quality, and such verse could not long support him. Yet he saw others--Bryant, Holmes, Longfellow, Cooper, Irving, Poe--who were earning a living by writing. If he could write well, he too could earn his living, for he could write in spite of frequent illnesses.

Whittier was never too frightened to face the big problems of life although minor concerns might worry him, such as smallpox in Canada or his neighbors laughing at his expense. Self-educating himself to write first-rate poetry challenged him, and from 1840 his writings show his determination to improve. No less markedly his, no less fiery on occasion, no less simply





written, they show more careful construction until, self-instructed and self-disciplined, the poet attained recognition with "Snow-Bound."

So, as Whittier was a reformer in the community life, he was also a reformer of his own literary life. His success was not a lucky chance but the fruit of persistent self-discipline, and more like Milton than any of his contemporary American poets, Whittier evidences no less able writing in his last years, no poorer understanding or weaker interest in humanity, although the character of the poems does grow less violent, more universal in theme, and more serenely confident in tone.

## VII. Quaker

When a man's religion is liturgical, it may reveal little of the man no matter how devout he is. But if a man is a Quaker of in good standing--as Whittier was throughout his life--one can assume that his religion is his life, for Quakerism places the whole emphasis squarely on individual search for truth and, after revelation, practical expression of it in word and deed.

Listening for the Inner Voice classifies Whittier as a mystic, but he was not a Yogi, seeking happiness in complete detachment from the world of affairs; he was a man of deeds, intensely concerned with human affairs, but not a Commissar doomed to utter disillusionment if worldly plans fail. With a firm belief in spiritual realities and this present world, he tried--as good men have from Abraham to Schweitzer--to





translate his faith in God and man to deeds for God and man. To be a Friend was no passive acceptance of family placement, but adoption of a program of life.

Pride in his Quaker heritage showed in his tales and poems of Quaker heroism under persecution. He was proud that his first Quaker ancestor had defended Quaker rights against persecution even before affiliating with that minority group. He was loyal to duty but "love as well as righteousness was in his lexicon"<sup>152</sup> and as he lashed out at intolerant Puritans, he added his not inconsiderable bit to the growing scorn of Cotton Mather who "came galloping down . . . .

Stirring the while in the shallow pool  
Of his brains for the lore he had learned at school,  
To garnish the story, with here a streak  
Of Latin and there another of Greek.<sup>153</sup>

Thus Whittier showed no tolerance of intolerance. He realized his readiness to ruthless denunciation and deplored it upon occasion, but his fiery spirit was kindled beyond his control by indignation at injustice. He confided to Ann Wendell: "I shudder sometimes at my fierce rebukes of erring-doers, when I consider my own weakness and sins of omission and commission."<sup>154</sup>

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152. Lewis H. Chrisman. John Ruskin, Preacher and Other Essays, p. 64.

153. "The Double-Headed Snake of Newbury," Complete Poetical Works, p. 61.

154. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, p. 318.





At the time of that statement he was not yet forty, and his writing continued to sear and burn for many a year after, whenever he was stirred by wrong. Theoretically he desired peace in community and personal matters--but practically he desired to fight for the right rather than let wrong prevail, and his firm convictions lent strength to his attacks.

Whittier was honest in his portrayal of Quakers; he did not hesitate to describe the eccentric behavior of the early, uncompromising fanatics, as in "Margaret Smith's Journal"--although even here the most troublesome person proved not to be a true Quaker, but merely a noisy hanger-on of the group. But the war monger in "The Little Iron Soldier"<sup>155</sup> speaks selfishly for war not only in the factory and on the Exchange but from the facing-seat in the Meeting House.

His honesty in writing of Quakers is similar to his honesty in speaking of himself. In the Nicholson Notebook, opposite a gushing Byronic effusion, there is a penciled note "Not Whittier's"; after it in heavier pencil, in Whittier's own hand, is added: "The author of these lines regrets to be compelled to say that the above is not the fact. He is sorry to say they are his, but he cannot now help it.W."<sup>156</sup>

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155. Writings, V, 250.

156. Edward D. Snyder. "Whittier Returns to Philadelphia," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXII, 147.





Whittier was proud, not only of past Quaker heroism, but of present Quaker doctrine. He firmly believed

a soul-sufficing answer  
Hath no outward origin;  
More than Nature's many voices  
May be heard within." 157

This conviction he held unshakable, revoicing it in such poems as "Questions of Life,"<sup>158</sup> and "The Meeting."<sup>159</sup> To him the shared silence of the meeting-house was much more rewarding than the silence of solitude:

For here the habit of the soul,  
Feels less the outer world's control;  
The strength of mutual purpose pleads  
More earnestly our common needs;  
And from the silence multiplied  
By these still forms on either side,  
The world that time and sense have known  
Falls off and leaves us God alone.

To him the final test of the truths of the Bible, the law, and the prophets was that they were in accord with "the light given immediately by the Holy Spirit . . . . "He asked: "Is the Bible more and better than the Spirit which inspired it?"<sup>160</sup> as he challenged Lyman Abbott's statement that the light of the spirit looked dim in comparison with the glorious truths of the New Testament. Yet testing the Bible by its correspondence

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157. "To ----- With A Copy Of Woolman's Journal," Complete Poetical Works, p. 172.

158. Ibid., p. 432.

159. Ibid., p. 445.

160. Lyman Abbott. "John Greenleaf Whittier, Mystic." Outlook CXXVII (1921), 98.





with inner convictions did in no way lessen its validity for Whittier. He talked the Bible, wrote the Bible, and lived the Bible.

Whittier's strong religious convictions did not make him narrow. He was interested in the scriptures of all the great faiths and he realized that there were many ways of expressing the same truth. The story is told of his lending Plato to a villager who remarked when he returned the book that somehow Plato had got hold of some of his own ideas. Whittier, in telling this said: "He was oriental in his cast of mind; he would have been quite at home with great religious leaders of any age or race. He had somehow reached the state of absolute quietude--a region of ineffable calm, blown over by no winds of hope or fear. All personal anxieties and solitudes were unknown. The outward was phantasmal and unreal."<sup>161</sup>

With any man who sought God directly, whether Buddhist, Roman Catholic monk, or religiously unaffiliated person, Whittier could go along--but he was irritated by strange new cults. Of Thoreau he wrote: "Walden is capital reading but very wicked and heathenish. The practical moral of it seems to be that if a man is willing to sink himself in a woodchuck he can live as cheaply as that quadruped."<sup>162</sup> Whitman's Leaves of Grass he

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<sup>161</sup>. Arthur Christy. "Orientalism of Whittier," American Literature V (1933), 249.

<sup>162</sup>. Bennett, Whittier, Bard of Freedom, 318.





threw into the fire. He had but little interest in "the amiable but misguided Rousseau."<sup>163</sup> He pitied Emerson for his lukewarm interest in immortality and desired the opportunity to enlighten him.

Whittier was so sure in his faith that he was not the least afraid of new revelation because he knew it would--it must--agree with what he knew. As he explained to two friends: "I am surprised at the anxiety of some religious teachers with regard to the effect of scientific investigations. We must never be afraid of truth, and more than that, truth can never contradict itself. Even evolution, if that can be proved, would not affect the doctrines we have been talking of."<sup>164</sup> Again and again he voiced this Quaker dependence on the Inner Light:

We live by Faith; but Faith is not the slave  
Of text and legend. Reason's voice and God's,  
Nature's and Duty's, never are at odds.<sup>165</sup>

So staunch in his ancestral faith, it is strange that Whittier should offer in his poetic work more poems on Oriental theses, more paraphrases of Oriental maxims, and more imitations of Oriental models than may be found in Emerson's verse. "A distinct anomaly" Christy calls this.<sup>166</sup> But these Oriental

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163. Writings, V, 293.

164. Marble, Friendships of Whittier, p. 410.

165. Complete Poetical Works, p. 164.

166. Christy, Orientalism of Whittier, p. 373.





poems, together with his poems of Roman Catholic background, "Red River Voyageur,"<sup>167</sup> are evidences of his true catholicity, his recognition of the unity of truth.

"No barriers caged thee in a bigot's fold,"<sup>168</sup> Holmes wrote of Whittier, and yet Whittier resented the intrusion of the ways of Calvinists and other Dissenters in the Friends' Meetings, and he was disturbed when good New Englanders--like Emerson and Thoreau--stepped off the platform of sound Christian orthodoxy. Here was a conflict in loyalties no sentimental person ever wholly escapes, and too often the attempt to wipe out nearer loyalties for larger ones ends in a Brahma Samaj of philosophical truths commanding little emotional response.

Naturally enough, as a Quaker, he had no special reverence for the parish priest or minister, and he did not hesitate to aim a scathing rebuke at the Congregational clergy of Massachusetts when they warned against anti-slavery agitation in their congregations, since such a controversial issue was likely to cause dissension. "Clerical Oppressors,"<sup>169</sup> "A Sabbath Scene,"<sup>170</sup> and a "Letter"<sup>171</sup> (supposedly written by a Methodist bishop)--all depict a hypocritical clergy; and even "The

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167. Complete Poetical Works, p. 69.

168. Oliver W. Holmer. "Between The Gates," Complete Poetical Works, p. 297.

169. Complete Poetical Works, p. 272.

170. Ibid., p. 312.

171. Ibid., p. 318.





Minister's Daughter"<sup>172</sup> suggests that the theologically prepared minister is likely to state untruths, blindly, dogmatically, until shown the truth by an innocent little child.

Sentimental attachment to Quakerism appears in Whittier's feeling for such minor sectarian matters as a decided preference for a steeple-less meeting house, no music in church service, the Quaker "thee" in ordinary speech, and the Quaker form for dates, with the day preceding the month. When in the legislature he had taken no oath of office and, in refraining from wearing a crape armband when a member died, he had been instrumental in doing away with the custom. So in little matters the plain Quaker way had set its seal upon him.

Since Quakers were opposed to war yet desired the emancipation of slaves, there were many of Whittier's faith who were confused about what their part should be during the Civil War. In a circular letter "To Members of the Society of Friends" Whittier suggested that they "Mitigate the sufferings of our countrymen," by visiting the sick and wounded, relieving widows and orphans, and practicing "economy for the sake of charity. Let the Quaker bonnet be seen by the side of the Catholic Sister of Charity in the hospital ward . . . . Our society is rich; of those to whom much is given much will be required in this hour of proving and trial."<sup>173</sup>

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172. Complete Poetical Works, p. 459.

173. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, II, 440.





Next to the plain, unadorned meeting house, Whittier believed the out-of-doors was conducive to worship. "I like the open fields and sky better than the grandest churches of man's building; and when the wind sounds in the great grove of pines on the hill near our house I doubt if there be a choir in all England so melodious and solemn."<sup>174</sup>

Summer was joyous--"the stepping-stones in the shallow brook," "the sweet clover-smell in the breeze," the "June sun warm," and "the bloom of roses under the eaves" of "Telling the Bees."<sup>175</sup> "Autumn with the yellow goldenrods" and "pale asters" outdid the "stains of the windows of old churches," as in "Margaret Smith's Journal."<sup>176</sup> But of the renewal of life in the springtime Whittier wrote again and again of "windflowers," "blue violets," "cowslips in the low ground, when it was bliss to open mine eyes in peace and love on so sweet a May morning."<sup>177</sup> Noting the natural beauty of the forest dotted with lakes and "intersected by a thousand streams more beautiful than those which the Old World has given to song and romance" made the poet marvel at the blindness of the early settlers who saw only "a desert and frightful wilderness."<sup>178</sup> And in personal letters

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174. Writings, V, 77.

175. Complete Poetical Works, p. 59.

176. Writings, V, 175.

177. Ibid., p. 20

178. Ibid., p. 362.





there are frequent comments such as this to Grace Greenwood:  
 "I feel daily like thanking God for the privilege of looking  
 upon another spring."<sup>179</sup>

But appreciation of nature and worship of Nature were quite different matters to Whittier. God's hand was seen in his creation, but Creator and creation were not to be confused, nor was Nature on a level with man--as a creation. Nature was strictly background, suitable for comparison as in the following phrases from "Ego": "unfolding like a morning flower," "sweet summer eyes," "the Indian summer of the heart," "the green buds of Youth's fresh May, with Fancy's leaf-enwoven bay." Nature was an illuminated book making lessons attractive: hope in "The Mayflowers,"<sup>181</sup> God's love in "The Lakeside,"<sup>182</sup> faith in immortality from "April,"<sup>183</sup> the cost of sin in "The Fruit-Gift,"<sup>184</sup> the reliability of Nature's prophecies in "The Old Burying Ground,"<sup>185</sup> gratitude in "The Palm Tree,"<sup>186</sup> the impossibility of complete human knowledge in "The Pressed Gentian."<sup>187</sup>

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179. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 178.

180. Complete Poetical Works, p. 388.

181. Ibid., p. 149.

182. Ibid., p. 144.

183. Ibid., p. 145.

184. Ibid., p. 148.

185. Ibid., p. 153.

186. Ibid., p. 155.

187. Ibid., p. 159.





Nature alone could not excite worship, nor "the poor offering of vain rites" "round fane and altar"; true worship came only with the recognition of the brotherhood of man:

To worship rightly is to love each other.  
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.<sup>188</sup>

There was always a balancing of the outer and inner compulsions in Whittier's life. Although tremendously influenced by the literature and philosophies of the world and by nature and men, he never wholly capitulated to any outside pressure. Even in those early years when he was casting about to discover where his talents lay, neither the romanticists, whom he admired and imitated, nor the romance-loving magazine readers, whom he tried to please by such morbid tales as "The Opium Eater," succeeded in making his work wholly synthetic. His individual bent is recognizable in the local geography and the local history and the Quaker themes in his earliest writings, although to the poet in later years "it seemed like someone else" when he read them.<sup>189</sup>

Throughout the years Whittier welcomed criticism humbly and gratefully, but "I have altered some of the rhymes" would be followed by explanations of his refusal to make other suggested changes, and then disarmingly--"However, as they say in the East, Who is my mother's son that I should presume to dictate to thy superior wisdom?"<sup>190</sup> And occasionally there was a violent

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188. "Worship," Complete Poetical Works, p. 429.

189. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 92.

190. Ibid., p. 349.





protest, as when after some alterations of "Snow-Bound" he wrote Mr. Fields: "Don't send the poem to me again. I shall tear it all to pieces with alterations, if thee do."<sup>191</sup>

This balance showed too in his editorial work. His sensitivity to others led to his experiencing great distress when criticized, yet his writing continued to show such assurance that upon meeting him a fellow-editor remarked: "A younger man than I had supposed."<sup>192</sup> Whittier trusted himself when action was demanded, although in retrospect he was often apologetic, as when he overestimated defects and underestimated the vigor of his poems written in crisis. When Whittier became editor of the American Manufacturer, it was, according to its prospectus, non-partisan and intended to indulge in "no controversial discussions under any pretext."<sup>193</sup> But Whittier commented editorially in high praise of Independence Day speeches which stressed the lack of liberty of certain miserable men in America, and he rejoiced over the changing status of the laborer. Certainly a controversial subject! No outer compulsion could restrain Whittier when he was moved to speak.

One might have expected young Whittier to continue to follow Garrison who had been such a potent factor in his career,

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191. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 495.

192. Ibid., p. 85.

193. B. M. Stearns. "John Greenleaf Whittier, Editor." New England Quarterly XIII (1940), 284.

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<sup>191</sup> Richard, John Greenleaf Whittier, I, 402.

<sup>192</sup> Id., p. 55.

<sup>193</sup> B. M. Stearns, "John Greenleaf Whittier, Editor,"  
New England Quarterly XIII (1940), 234.



but instead, when necessity demanded, he followed his own convictions, even though the break was so distasteful to him that in anticipation he stayed away from the decisive meeting. His action at that time was as pronounced, if less explosive, as when he answered an abusive article criticizing his anti-slavery attitude. He announced: "No earthly friendship nor literary celebrity appears to me to weigh a feather in the scale against the holy, heaven-born privilege of defending the inalienable rights of God's poor."<sup>194</sup>

Independence and self-respect were in Whittier's practical creed. Respect for others was there too, and as we have seen, his generosity in judgment led him sometimes to unwarranted superlatives. If Whittier had had university training, one feels he might have weighed his statements more critically; perhaps not, for "the most beautiful official paper I have ever read"<sup>195</sup> was no doubt an accurate statement of his feeling toward Governor Saxton's proclamation at that time.

If, as Addison once suggested, humor stems from truth, then we can see the legitimacy of Whittier's fund of good humor. Many anecdotes are preserved of his harmless jokes on family and friends and of his unexpected remarks. If he was inclined to be effusive with others, he was credulous when the tables

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<sup>194</sup>. Charlotte Grimke. "Personal Recollections of Whittier." New England Magazine, VIII (1893), 468.

<sup>195</sup>. Ibid., p. 472.





were turned. Once Mrs. Claflin expressed her enjoyment of his visit saying: "Even when you are in your own room I am happier for knowing that you are in the house." He hesitated a moment, then said with emphasis: "Thee are a sensible woman--don't thee talk so--I cannot believe thee."<sup>196</sup>

Whittier always stressed the fact that he was Quaker both by birthright and conviction. Of course it was the conviction which molded his life. "To his eyes our rugged New England was a holy land, and the White Hills were authentic Sinais and Olivets, and the Merrimack a river of God."<sup>197</sup> The barefoot boy need not have been a dreamer; the editor and politician need not have been a prophet of social betterment; the poet need not have chosen to teach and preach and moralize--but Whittier was a reformer who began on himself, turning his mysticism into practical channels, for personal righteousness and obedience to the divine light were the directives of his life.

Whatever one thinks of the artistry of Whittier's poetry there is no denial that he dealt effectively with important themes, and his poetry is a reflection of himself. His outlook was large, his beliefs sound, his deeds worthy, his spiritual career shows in his second published poem, "The Deity"<sup>198</sup> as it

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196. Mary Claflin. Personal Recollections, p. 32.

197. W. H. Savage. "Whittier's Religion." Arena X (1894), 153.

198. Complete Poetical Works, p. 484.





shows in his last, "Between The Gates."<sup>199</sup> Occasional petty fears and oversentimental ardor in minor matters weigh little against his steady courageous forward pattern of life. He is a bold critic who underestimates even Whittier's art, for his art and his life are part and parcel of the man.

Toward the end of Whittier's career Sir Edmund Gosse visited him and, after describing the generosity, simplicity, earnestness, gaiety, and charm of Whittier, added: "I think it would be difficult to form in the imagination a figure more appropriate to Whittier's writings than Whittier himself proved to be in the flesh."<sup>200</sup>

We have seen that Whittier is a reformer, a prophet, a teacher in every situation, but what saves him from being unspeakably didactic is his modesty that is always near the surface of his outward sureness. In appropriate fashion he thanks the National Carriage Builders' Association for honorary membership:

I am not a builder in the sense of Milton's phrase of one who could "build the lofty rhyme." My vehicles have been the humbler sort--merely the farm wagon and the buckboard of verse, and not likely to run so long as Dr. Holmes's "One Hoss Shay," the construction of which entitles him to the first place in your association. I shall not dare to warrant any of my work for a long drive.<sup>201</sup>

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199. Whittier's Complete Poetical Works, p. 476.

200. Edmund Gosse. Portraits and Sketches, p. 140.

201. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, II, 692.





Whittier was continually reminding men to strive toward the better life; but his practical common sense, and sympathy from having learned the hard way, and his lively sense of humor made him a fellow-traveller his own generation loved. And it was the judgment of his own generation that Whittier was interested in.

"Who cares for the opinion of the twentieth century?" he wrote Lucy Hooper. "Not I, for one. But we do all care for the opinions of the good and wise and the pure-hearted around us."<sup>202</sup>

Let us give Whittier the final word. It is doubly appropriate, for it fits the findings of this paper and it was a suggestion to one, William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., when he was about to give a talk on Whittier at Newburyport.

Do me, as I am sure thou wilt, the justice to note that I have not lived merely for literary reputation,--that what I most desired was to do my duty as a man, all else was incidental and subordinate.<sup>203</sup>

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202. Pickard, John Greenleaf Whittier, II, 211.

203. Winfield Scott. "Poetry in America: A New Consideration of Whittier's Verse." New England Quarterly, VII (1934), 263.





## AN ABSTRACT

of

## JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER: A PSYCHOGRAPH

## I

John Greenleaf Whittier desired to be known as a reformer. He was not a radical, but he believed in conserving the good in the past while correcting specific wrongs. In his ardor and singleness of purpose, as well as in his championship of man and his rights, Whittier was like the Old Testament prophets. In later life Whittier's poetry reflected less fiery spirit and more Quaker quietude.

Whittier was born in 1807 on a farm in Haverhill, Massachusetts. His Quaker parents, while limited in means, were highly respected in the community. Whittier's meager education ended with two terms in the Haverhill Academy, but he was an avid reader, was particularly interested in poetry, and made the most of his educational opportunities. The attention of William Lloyd Garrison was directed to Whittier's first attempts at poetry, and Garrison's recommendation placed Whittier in his first editorial position. Whittier's successive editorships of several New England periodicals were interrupted, first by his father's death, then by his own ill-health. He had attempted various types of writing before his decision in 1833 to join the abolitionists. Then he turned his abilities toward fighting slavery.





Although popularity came early to Whittier, it continued to increase with the years. "Snow-Bound" brought him widespread literary acclaim. Only after his death did his name begin to lose in popular estimation.

## II

Whittier was strongly inclined toward politics, and his prospects in such a career were bright, but he sacrificed his personal ambitions for active support of the unpopular cause of anti-slavery. He played a very important, although unofficial, role of political adviser. He saw issues clearly and expressed them unequivocally, as was evidenced in his first denunciation of the slave system, Justice and Expediency. His understanding of men was unusual. From Haverhill he kept leaders to their avowed purpose by constant reminders, suggestions, criticism, commendation. He recognized the importance of local politics and took part in village affairs. His earnestness, humor, respect for all, indignation at wrong, and certainty that every man is a potential factor for good--these all are shown in his political activities.

## III

Whittier's primary social interest was abolition. He never ceased to be proud of having signed the "Declaration of Sentiments," and he continued in fervent, devoted service until the cause was won. He showed no Quaker restraint in his blasts against slavery, such as Massachusetts to Virginia and Our Fellow-Countrymen in Chains. He did not hesitate to rebuke the





clergy and denounce the church-sponsored Colonization Society for their failure to support the emancipation program, which he believed was achievable peaceably. He expected reform to come by "ballots, not bullets," and broke with Garrison over just that issue. His love of right and indignation against wrong made him risk mob-violence, although he was fearful of indignities and hated the adverse criticism of his contemporaries. Although Whittier thought slavery was the major social problem, he was interested in all social issues; such as the problems of war, labor, women, Indians, foreigners, and capital punishment. Whittier's great influence over men came through their recognition of his wholly disinterested, unselfish devotion to anti-slavery.

#### IV

Whittier had a genius for making and keeping friends, for he considered friendship sacred. Among his friends were many lesser writers whom he had encouraged, such as Lucy Larcom and Alice and Phoebe Carey. Whittier was loved by the villagers at Haverhill for his sympathetic understanding and generosity. He was not only nationally but internationally known and admired by such men as Don Pedro and John Bright. There were no barriers of age, sex, education, or social position between Whittier and his associates, for he was thoroughly grounded in his belief in the equality of man. However, he never overcame a certain self-consciousness in the presence of the Concord poets. He was inclined to be extravagant in his praise of friends, but





invariably his praise was for service to humanity or for spiritual goodness. His friendships were innumerable and enduring.

## V

The reason for Whittier's celibacy is a moot question. Mordell's theory that he was disappointed in love and was thereby warped in his attitude toward women does not seem tenable in consideration of the facts. Whittier's family obligations and his scanty earnings seem to have precluded early marriage. Ill-health was no doubt a contributing reason for not marrying early. His sister Elizabeth was a sympathetic participant in all his interests, and she was his home-maker after their mother's death. Throughout life Whittier had many friends of the opposite sex, but there is no proof, either in his life or his writings, that he had a very serious love affair. He approved of marriage as a way of life, and his friendly relations with persons with whom he is rumored to have been romantically in love continued throughout their lives.

## VI

In childhood Whittier had been ambitious to write. He found encouragement in his family and friends, but he had very little help through education to a mastery of the art. His first attempts show imitation and lack of controlling motive. With his decision to support anti-slavery, we see a change in the character of his writing comparable to the change in himself. Whittier became unselfishly devoted to abolition and wrote copiously for that cause. For many years his writings were largely occasional,





and therefore hurriedly executed. They were good propaganda, but questionable literary works. During an enforced rest because of illness in 1839 and 1840, Whittier realized the inferior quality of his writings and determined to start on the slow up-hill road of self-discipline to a mastery of good writing. In later years he never ceased to strive for a greater degree of perfection in his poems.

## VII

Whittier was a Quaker by birthright and conviction. He was both a mystic and a man of the world, intensely interested in human betterment and mightily indignant at intolerance and injustice. He was very proud of Quaker history, and he used many Quaker themes in his writings. He was convinced that the ultimate authority in religion was the Inner Voice, but he revered and followed the Bible, since it was sanctioned by that Authority. He had respect for all religious persons who sought God directly, and he found truth in the Oriental religions. But he was irritated by the strange, new ideas of Thoreau and Whitman. He had no special regard for clergymen and in other ways showed his sentimental attachment to the Quaker customs. He loved the out-of-doors, but he was not a Nature-worshiper. He was very sensitive to everything and everyone around him, yet he never wholly capitulated to outside influences. He was well balanced between self-respect and respect for others. His practicality, his sense of humor, and his ready sympathy--all

and a very high quality of work.

The quality of the work is very high.

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helped to make him a favorite with his generation; his controlling desire to do his duty in the world made him a reformer, which he desired to be.

Wells, "Whittier's One Singing Voice." Review of Religion, XLVI (1907), 135-137.

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